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TALES FROM THE CRYPT™

DEMON KNIGHT

A Novelization by Randall Boyll
Based on the Screenplay by
Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris & Mark Bishop



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For decades the famed E.C. Comics and highly rated HBO anthology. *Tales From the Crypt,* has proved killer entertainment for millions of fans with its penchant for macabre humor. Now, the show's creators—the combined forces behind *The Omen. Back to the Future,* and *Predator*—have united to bring the shock classic and its celebrated Groucho of Gore, the Cryptkeeper, to the big screen. *DEMON KNIGHT* is the first of a terror-filled trio of motion pictures designed to raise the level of goosebumps to new heights.

Good versus Evil . . . a battle that has taken place countless times, over as many millennia, has come to the Mission Hotel. To its five boarders, Brayker is just another lost soul looking for a place to rest. To the Collector, Brayker is the last soldier standing guard over the gates separating hell and earth. Tonight, each and every one of them will learn why hell is much more than just a four letter word.

He Snapped His Head Up and His Crazy Grin Came Back.

Again lightning stroked the sky and cast harsh light over him. “Ask Brayker why you’re about to die,” he shouted over the following clap of thunder. “Ask Brayker!”

He swept his hand to the side and tipped out a small bit of his blood. It spattered on the gravel and was instantly washed under by the rain.

“Arise, friend,” he intoned as if in prayer.

At that spot in the gravel a strange lump bumped upward with a crunch. Wet rocks tumbled lazily from its peak. Jeryline barely had time to blink before the earth underneath the spot erupted into a geyser of dirt and mud. Some wet, syrupy thing burst up, hurling more dirt and a spray of mucus aside. In that wink of an eye she saw arise, crouched and newborn and blinking stupidly in the rain, a guy in a cheap rubber monster suit.

What the hell? she wondered. *What the* . . .



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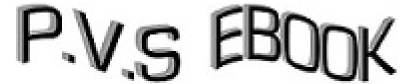
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DEMON KNIGHT

Blood and Guts on the Stairs and Bathroom Floor Too!

by
T. C. Keeper

Imagine that there is a big old house atop a hill. The house is painted all white but the paint is flaking off in big pieces, but it doesn't matter because it is dark outside anyway and there is no porch light. But lightning flashes now and then so you could see it after all, the flaking paint. Now go inside the house—in your imagination—and imagine there is a pile of clothes in a heap on the floor of a bedroom. The house is so big it has six . . . no, *eight* bedrooms. In your imagination you are in one of them, and there is a big pile of clothes, and now you see they are all bloody. The blood is red—you can tell because the light is on in the bedroom—and man, talk about *red!*

Then there is this woman standing there taking off her blouse, which is all bloody from her just having hacked her husband up real bad. In fact, she is in her underwear and feels like taking a nice hot bath after having hacked up her husband so bad. But now the phone rings. She answers by saying Hello into the phone after she picks it up.

It is her lover. That is why she hacked up her husband just before this story started, because she has been having an affair with another dude. She tells her lover now that yes she did it, he is hacked up real bad. Then she says, I am going to take a shower now. So she goes into the bathroom. The house is so big it has ten bathrooms and she goes into the closest one. In the mirror she sees herself and smiles, and her teeth are all bloody like maybe she was *eating* the body or something.

But while she's in the bathtub her husband is *coming back to life!* He has been hacked up but now his body, which she put in the basement in a barrel of acid, starts moving and wiggling. Blood, guts, intestines, his liver, his lymph nodes, his heart, which has started beating again. So what is left of Walter crawls up the basement steps with the axe that *she* used still sticking out of his skull. The house is so big it has fourteen stairways, and he must crawl up all of them and it takes him a long while.

But she is taking a long bath upstairs, so he has time. Finally he pulls the axe out of his head and opens the door. Amanda doesn't

notice this yet because she has put a washrag over her eyes to get rid of her makeup. So when the door opens and he is there holding the axe, she doesn't see. Then Walter crawls in and lifts the axe over his head! He has only one arm left so it is hard. He raises it up, up, up! Blood and goop slide down the wooden axe handle. Suddenly Amanda notices! And the axe makes a sound like whoosh, like a subway train, loud like that because her husband is swinging it so hard. It splits her head *real* bad. Blood squirts all over the walls and radiator and sink. Walter says, "Touché" but then Amanda comes back to life! She kills him again, then he kills her, and they do it until they are nothing but slices and pieces like noodles and pasta or dog food. Then her lover comes over and finds them like that, little squiggly pieces that can never die.

The End

Hi, kiddies! Pretty bad, huh? This is your old pal The Crypt Keeper. I wrote that little horror story six months ago, as my first assignment in The Famous Dead Writer's Course. *It's a mail-order correspondence course designed to turn mediocre writers into top-notch frighters. Ever read any books by Clive Darker, Scream Koontz, John Skull, or every bodies' favorite, Stephen Cringe? That's how they all learned how to write so well. With the publication of this book I join their ranks—and I'm ranker than* they'll *ever be! Probably richer now, too!*

Yes, The Famous Dead Writer's Course *turned a fledgling Edgar Ailing Poe like myself into what I am now, the author of the book you are holding in your hands, paws, claws, talons, whatever. If this book sells enough copies they might make it into a movie, and if they do, your favorite T. C. Keeper will write the screenplay and direct the movie himself. You can bet your life on it—if you still have one after reading this story!*

In the next pages you will meet thirteen people who have a very peculiar night ahead of them. Death stalks us all, but tonight Death has chosen especially to stalk a lonesome dot on the map called Wormwood, an already dying town in the parched deserts of New Mexico that will soon find itself in a battle the size of all creation itself. So sit back, fright fans. Make yourselves comfortable, prop up your feet, have a bubbling cup of arsenic or warm blood, and spread these pages wider. My finely-boned writing skills will now take you away to an empty highway in the shadow of the Superstition Mountains, where a bloated full moon hangs in the velvet sky, and the devil himself is about to claw his way to the surface, looking for . . . you!

Hee, hee, hee!

1

For Deputy Sheriff Bob Martel, these Saturday night patrols were the only part of his job that made being a cop worthwhile. He had joined the force four years ago after an uneventful stint in the army, into which he had enlisted with the hope of shooting krauts or gooks or Iranians, or who-the-hell-ever Uncle Sam didn't like at the time. Instead the army assigned him to be an ammunition handler in the artillery, which meant hauling hundred-pound shells out of wooden cases and passing them up the line to the big bang-bang gun. Since there was, to his regret, no war going on at the time, the howitzers shot at dusty hillsides on the Oklahoma prairie, where a big puff of exploded sagebrush was the only reward. How he had hated it. But now, now . . .

Bob Martel was in his element. The night was new and not quite as black as it soon would be, and from his hiding position behind a billboard on this long stretch of New Mexico Highway 47, Bob was in a perfect position to spot speeding cars. There was something in the air above Highway 47, he had decided a couple months ago, that just made people want to floor the gas pedal and see how many mph the speedometer could streak through. There were times when his souped-up patrol car—actually an elderly Ford Galaxy with a bad case of the wheezes—had trouble catching up with the perpetrators of crimes against speeding. (The drivers were perps, as Bob Martel liked to call them.) But the road was a straight shot for eighteen miles and the Ford could generate 160 mph on a stretch like that, so no perp could outrun him in the end.

The sun was becoming a memory now as darkness settled in deeper. Sitting in the soft glow of assorted dash lights, his mirror sunglasses reflecting green squares, Bob lifted his deputy's hat for a moment and scratched at his bushy hair. He dropped it back on his head and checked his watch. Ten-thirty almost, just about time for the teeny-bopper crowd from Lost Mesa to roar out of the hamburger joints there and hightail it to Avery, where half-a-dozen bars rarely checked for ID and the other half-dozen *never* did. Deputy Martel knew very well that if he had the patience, these same kids would roar from Avery back to Lost Mesa drunk off their asses, and he could hand out DWIs like Christmas candy.

But he couldn't wait. His shift ended at midnight tonight, and

Sheriff Tupper, the human whale that was Bob's boss, would take over the reins of duty. This was the part of the job that galled Bob Martel so much: he was young and physically fit, could walk on his freaking *knuckles* faster and farther than Sheriff Tupper could ever walk on his big flat feet, but the son of a bitch outranked him and got all the choice missions and the choice perps.

But not tonight.

It was almost eleven when the first true speeder swooshed past the billboard where Martel was lurking. It was a dark and shiny Pontiac Firebird convertible with the top folded all the way down and the driver's foot crushed to the floor so hard his heel was digging up asphalt. Deputy Martel, his nerves already humming with anticipation, grinned as his hand jerked to the dashboard and flipped the switch that made his overhead bar of reds, whites, and blues flash on. This guy had to be doing eighty or ninety, a hundred even; he had nearly sucked the Holiday Inn advertisement off the billboard with such speed. He was now demoted from the rank of driver to the rank of perp, and Deputy Martel had every happy intention of catching him and making him regret every inch of this felonious highway misuse.

Martel slapped his hand to the official key stuck in the column, cranked it, and popped the headlights fully on. He slammed the gearshift from Park into Drive and crunched the gas pedal down, already spinning the steering wheel hard to the right. The phrase "Yee-hah!" leapt out of his mouth. Bouncing up and down on the seat in his brown and yellow uniform, his cop-lights making colored flashes in the dark, he poured on the speed and gave chase.

He thought.

It took a second. His elbows stopped flapping and his grin faded into a confused frown. He looked up, he looked down. He looked at the disappearing taillights of the Pontiac, looked at the glowing instrument panel, which made his tight little face look Martian green.

"Bitch!"

He cranked the key again, this time listening to hear if the Ford's motor wanted to start or not. It did, then quit, then ran again. Strange activities took place under the hood, knocks and groans and steamy things that hissed and quit, then hissed again and smelled, to Deputy Martel, like the mentholated steam he'd had to inhale as a child because of asthma.

"Junkyard pile of shit!" he screamed when everything died again. He pounded the steering wheel with his open hands. "Run, bitch, *run!* The perp is halfway to Albuquerque already! Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeze?"

Chugga-chugga-chugga. Boom-rattle-die.

He could have wept.

Until the next car roared past. The Holiday Inn sign seemed to suck inward as the noise came; when the black Cadillac shot past with a breathy roar the sign puffed out and wobbled on its posts, threatening to fall over. Deputy Martel hauled in a wondering breath while the car's taillights painted thin red streaks across the lenses of his sunglasses. Major perps here, folks. Someone needed a ticket in a very bad way.

Martel was reaching to try the key again when the Firebird's wheels locked up and it went into a long, tire-burning skid. The headlights lurched into view, were replaced by the taillights as the car spun, then came into view again, filtered through dense blue tire-smoke. It screamed to a stop, blocking both lanes of the highway.

Martel bleated and groaned as the old Ford's engine cranked and cranked without coming fully to life. He watched in helpless fascination as the black Cadillac bore down on the Firebird, its headlights piercing the night in two jittering cones that winked and flashed off the Firebird's dusty hide. Rather than slowing, the Cadillac seemed to be speeding up, probably going better than eighty now, maybe ninety.

Martel's police cruiser jumped to sudden life. He smashed the shift lever down with his fist and gave the old Ford a big new dent under the gas pedal. Tires spun and cooked as two huge founts of gravel and dirt shot from the wheels to clatter against the Holiday Inn sign. Fishtailing crazily, Martel found the road and gave chase. He saw the door of the Firebird hinge open. He saw the barrel of some kind of gun, a rifle maybe, that a dark figure levered upward. Flame popped out of it once, twice. The windshield of the Cadillac imploded yet still it gained speed. Martel thought—but could not be sure at this insane pace—that he saw the dark figure leap from the open Firebird and somersault away from it, down into the ditch beside the road. At perhaps one hundred miles per hour now, the Cadillac closed the last few yards. The head of the driver was very visible in Martel's headlights, a driver making no move to slow down or swerve or do *anything* to avoid a collision.

The two cars met. The explosion as they were welded to each other was huge and bright, making Martel cross his arms over his eyes and reminding him very much of the artillery range at Fort Sill, where he had humped bombs for so long. The noise was gigantic, a tremendous *kawhoom!* that nearly blew his hat off his head. He mashed both feet onto the brake pedal and sent the Ford into a long, loping curve that nearly ended in the ditch. Burning junk and drops of molten metal rained down, cracking his windshield and utterly ruining the wax job he had given the Ford not a week ago with his own elbow grease.

It did not concern him for long. White and yellow flames geysered into the black sky, lighting the entire area and throwing long, twisting shadows across the desert floor and its collection of sagebrush. He grabbed for the radio mike, missed it, tried again.

"Mavis? You there?"

He waited. Mavis Dornberry was not famous for staying awake during the night shift.

"Mavis! Come in, dammit!"

The radio crackled. Her tired voice came through as grumpy and lifeless as a yawn: "Yeah, Bob, what now?"

"Get Sheriff Tupper. Get him fast. There's been a humongo car crash out here on forty-seven just outside of town."

"Bag the perp yet?" she asked with infinite sarcasm.

Martel noticed that his hands were shaking. Hell, *all* of him was shaking. "Cut the crap, Mavis, I'm not in the mood for it. Rattle Tupper's chain and get his big fat ass out here *now.* Got me?"

"You're got," she replied nastily. "Out."

Martel swung his door open and stepped out, covering the top of his head with his arms, wary of the ashes and debris that were still pattering down. The heat from the burning cars kept him at a respectful distance. He looked over to the ditch where he thought the man had landed after piling out of the Firebird, but it was a long strip of burning gasoline no one could have survived. Besides, the explosion alone probably did him in; no one could have been within fifty yards without getting his arms and legs blown off by the concussion.

He skirted the wreck. Acrid smoke burned his nostrils, smelling mostly of fried paint and cooked foam rubber. Doubtless the guy in the Cadillac was in there deader than dogshit and burning like a torch, but he decided that the drunken bastard probably deserved it. Both of them did, for speeding like that.

He stepped back to the cruiser, which was now idling quite nicely with no hint at having been asleep on duty. Scowling, he launched a flat-footed kick at the passenger door that left a respectable dimple in the aging sheet metal. See if *he* would ever wax the renegade son of a bitch again.

Something tapped his shoulder then. He brushed quickly at it, cringing in case it was something on fire.

It was. The tall man standing behind him had wisps of smoke drifting from tattered holes in his suit. Part of his hair was smoldering. His face was streaked with soot and his tie had been burnt all the way up to the knot at his neck.

"Yeeks!" Martel exclaimed, for lack of anything better.

“Pardon me,” the man said. “Did you happen to see which way that other fellow went?”

“Hubba,” Martel informed him stupidly. “Dubba-hubba.”

“Please try to think,” the burning man said. “I simply must find him.”

Martel raised an arm and pointed to the wreckage. “Dat.”

“East? That way?”

He nodded, shook his head, nodded again. At any moment now, he assumed, he would wake up and find he had dozed off behind the Holiday Inn sign.

“Very well,” the man said. He primly flicked a fallen ash off the back of his hand. Martel saw a very nice gold watch around his wrist. The glass crystal was milky white from having melted recently. In the other hand he held a small leather case that looked just as bad. The man sketched a brief salute. “You’ve been too kind, and I am very sorry about the mess.”

He started away. Martel found his mind at last. “But how?” He flapped his hands, pointed at the wreckage. “How did? . . .”

The man smiled. “Airbags. You just gotta love them. Wonderful safety device. Ingenious discovery. Stupendous invention. Seat belts help a lot, too. Now let me be the first to say goodbye.”

He walked away. Martel found himself waving bye-bye like an idiot. “Wait!” he called, but already the man had vanished into the desert.

2

Danny Long was only eight years old, but he felt like eighty tonight. During the years the little town called Wormwood died its slow death, he had seen friends and classmates leave the place in droves, along with their mommies and daddies, of course. Now Wormwood was officially dead: there was nothing left here anymore but a boarding house and one tired old gas station, and even they were about to go belly-up. His mother and father owned and operated the Eureka Cafe on the edge of town, which was kept alive only by the handful of tourists who would bumble in sometimes, asking directions to Albuquerque or the like, and wind up staying for chow. Even the school had closed its doors, and Danny was tutored at home by Cordelia Jackson, the town's only whore. Life was odd in Wormwood. It was about to get odder.

He was sitting in the dark on the old wooden porch of the Eureka Cafe, killing time while his mom and dad cleaned up for the night. His dad, Homer, was currently putting all the chairs onto the red-and-white checkered tables so his mom could mop the floor, complaining all the while. Her name was Wanda, so Danny had a crew of oddballs named Homer and Wanda for parents: Homer the clown, and Wanda the Wicked Witch of the West. Added also to the roster of names was a certain fellow named Roach, who did some cooking and some cleaning in exchange for free food and a couple of dollars a day. This dowdy existence and these dowdy people formed the sight and sound of Danny's life: Homer, Wanda, and Roach. And, of course Cordelia Jackson, the jaded former schoolteacher turned prostitute.

Who wouldn't be sick of it? Dullsville all the way, even for an eight-year-old.

And now, inside the cafe as it settled down for the night, his mom and dad began the usual late-night arguing. Danny considered covering his ears, but he knew the routine almost by heart.

"Come on, Homer, get a move on! The way you're moving it'll be dawn before we're done!" That would be Wanda.

This would be Homer: "You know, if you ever got off of your fat ass and helped, we might get home a little faster!"

After a bit of this, Roach chimed in: "Jeez, put a lid on it, willya? I got a date tonight!"

And on, and on. Dullsville all the way. Nothing ever happened at

the Eureka Cafe except lousy food and loud bickering. Nothing.

Danny Long was almost dozing in the dark when crunching footsteps made themselves known on the pot-holed street. A shadow loomed in the moonlight, thick and distorted, bobbing to its owner's footfalls. Then the footsteps grew slower, quieter: somebody was trying to be sneaky all of a sudden, Danny guessed, and doing a bad job of it. Directly in front of him sat two elderly cars gleaming mellowly under the moonlight, the ailing family Bronco and the truck that Roach liked to tool around in like some kind of big shot. Beyond them lay the rest of the town, where only a few houses cast any kind of light through their windows and the rest were boarded up.

The owner of the footsteps crept into view, a man with his shoulders hunched quite criminally and his head swiveling from side to side in the dark. As he moved, his face caught a wedge of moonlight and held it a moment. Danny, crunching himself a little tighter as he sat in the safety of the dark, took mental notes: a stranger about as old as his father, kind of tall and kind of thin. Weeds and pieces of sagebrush stuck out of his hair. His skin was shiny with sweat and his eyes gleamed like big black olives.

The stranger edged closer. Something flashed in his hand briefly, just long enough for Danny to see: a knife with a long chrome blade and big neat holes in the folding handles. Danny's friend Mark Oleson had found one like that out by the highway a few years back, just before he moved away, but his dad made him throw it away. Besides, it was all bent and rusty. But not this one, the one the stranger was advancing with. The man stopped at the passenger door of the Bronco, eyeballed things for a bit, then went to work trying to jimmy the lock. Metal crunched and squealed in tiny spurts of sound.

Though Danny's heart had slipped into a higher gear, he felt no fear at all. This dark man attacking the door of the Bronco was interesting as hell, far more interesting than what Wormwood usually had to offer. Yet he felt compelled to speak; it was, after all, his dad's only set of wheels.

"So like, whatcha doing?" he offered into the silence.

The stranger became a motionless block of darkness. A bit of moonbeam gleamed on the topmost part of his head, where a small twig of tumbleweed stuck up out of his hair like a blond cowlick.

"Are you trying to cut off my daddy's Bronco handle?"

The shape attempted a reply: "Uhhhhhhh . . ."

"Maybe even steal it?"

The shape stepped closer. Danny scooted backward, ready to holler if murder became part of these odd goings-on.

“I am a lock-checker,” the stranger said. “Yours checks out fine. And say, how would you like a nice shiny quarter, young friend? I bet I’ve got one.”

“Try a dollar,” Danny said.

“A dollar? Well, by golly, I just might have a dollar here someplace.”

He was still coming closer. Danny scooted back until the heels of his scuffed-up cowboy boots caught on the edge of the porch. After that, he knew, only a quick scramble backwards could save him. Rather than waiting for the knife to slash and hack and kill—which always happened in the movies—he rocked up onto his knees, ready to jump.

“There—found one! Look!”

Danny looked. The stranger’s hand was extended toward him in a shaft of moonlight, his finger and thumb tweezing a dollar bill for him to take. On the man’s palm—crooked and hard to see, but very strange anyway—was a birthmark or tattoo of some kind. It appeared to be a circle of little stars. One of them, just beneath a crease in the skin, seemed to glow and pulsate.

“Well?” the stranger said, his voice grating as if he were tired of this game already and anxious to get back to the business at hand. “Do you want the damn thing, or not?”

Danny opted for not. He jumped to his feet and scurried to the door of the cafe. “Dad!” he shouted through the screen door. “Hey, Dad! Someone’s out here stealing your car!”

Nothing happened for a long bit of time. Then a lot of feet began beating their way from inside to outside, accompanied by shouts and squawks.

Danny turned before the herd arrived to burst through the door. Caught in a slanting bar of moonlight, the stranger’s eyes met his. “You just blew it, kid,” he said, then shuffled around and jogged tiredly away. As the screen door popped open to bang against the wall, Danny saw him round the corner of the street, and then he was gone.

“Where?” Homer shouted. “Where’s he at?” He paused in his agitation long enough to confront Danny. “If you’re just crying wolf,” he panted, “get ready to cry for real.”

“No wolf,” Danny shouted back. “He went thataways!”

Homer, Wanda, and Roach looked. There was nothing to look at but gutted buildings that had once been shops and stores. Moonlight twinkled on broken glass in the gutters; a cloud slipped across the face of the moon and everything momentarily went black.

Homer propped his fists on his hips and gave Danny a furious glare.

"So help me, Danny," he growled, "so help me God . . ."

"He was sticking a knife in the door handle. A fold-up knife like Mark Oleson had once. What are they called?"

"Butterfly," Roach chimed in to say. "Gimme a minute."

He walked to the Bronco. Danny heard the tinkling of keys and coins. A cigarette lighter snapped to life in a quick yellow flame. Roach studied the handle, then straightened. "Your kid ain't lyin'," he called out, and pocketed his lighter again. "The lock's been pried apart and there's some paint been chipped off."

Homer's face twisted into an angry frown. "Steal my Bronco, eh? Chip my paint, eh?" He turned and stomped back inside, muttering to himself. Wanda followed, trailed by Danny, who was feeling pretty important now. Homer stalked to the cash register and uncovered the telephone, which was stashed under a pile of used towels. He jerked the receiver to his ear, dialed three short numbers, and ground his teeth together while inspecting the ceiling.

Wanda drew Danny closer. "Did you get a good look at him?" she asked in a whisper. "Do you remember anything about him?"

"All of it," Danny said. "Every bit."

Homer jerked more erect. "Mavis? Get Sheriff Tupper down to the Eureka right now. Somebody just vandalized my car, tried to steal it, messed it all up, jimmied the lock, you name it. What?"

He frowned, his eyeballs rotated a few times, his lips formed strange positions. "Damn," he finally said. "Okay, we'll sit tight until he shows up."

He slammed the phone down. "Fat-assed bastard anyway. Public servant, my foot." He picked up a towel and began twisting it in his hands. "Jackie Gleason was more of a public servant than Tupper ever will be, and they're both just as fat. Danny!"

Danny perked up.

"Go do the restrooms, hose them down with Lysol. And don't be peeking at the dirty Kotexes in the ladies' room trash anymore!"

Danny groaned inside. "Dad, I don't wanna . . ."

"Do it! Now! Git!"

Danny scuttered away, fuming. Here he was, he'd just saved the Bronco from being stolen, just risked getting stabbed doing it, and his reward was to clean up the toilets. He wished, at this moment, that his dad would just plain drop dead.

He would regret this thought for the rest of his life.

It is a law of the West that every town must have a resident Town

Drunk. The Town Drunk of Wormwood went by the name of Wallace Pickerford Gimley, a once-genteel old fart who had lost a small fortune in silver-mine investments in 1964 and, rather than commit suicide, decided to stash his brain in a whiskey bottle until the time came to keel over dead from alcohol poisoning, which he expected to happen around 1965. To his surprise, and everyone's amazement, it was 1995 and he *still* hadn't died. Rumors about Uncle Willie, as he had come to be known, used to fly thick and fast before the town died. He was actually dead but too pickled to rot. He was once featured in an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries.* He was from an alien planet where the drunks lived for a thousand years. He was really drinking root beer. He was a vampire. He was Elvis.

In reality, he was just an atrocious drunk. Tonight, for no reason at all, he was preparing to bed down under the awning of the soon-to-be-defunct Sinclair gas station just down the street from the Eureka Cafe. For a pillow he had a stuffed bear some kid had tossed into a trash can. For a blanket he had last Sunday's funny pages. For a midnight snack he had a half-eaten Twinkie and a can of hair spray.

The moon shone down—interrupted by occasional clouds that threatened a thunderstorm soon—as he set to work on the hair spray. It was a battered can of Aqua-Net he had lucked into. Sitting on his funny pages to keep them from escaping into the rising wind, he turned the Aqua-Net upside-down and mashed the button in. A squirt of hair spray hissed out, followed by nothing but the butane and propane propellant. When the gas was depleted he set the can on the macadam, pulled the spray cap off, and pried out the plastic retainer with his pocketknife, which had half a blade left and had come from the bottom of a Dumpster down on Wilder Street by the boarded-up True-Value hardware store.

Now came the fun part. He pocketed his knife and leaned back against the warm cinderblocks of the station, grinning. This was going to be a double-whammy. The taste of the stuff was a mixture of burning plastic and secret chemicals so hideous they probably glowed in the dark. The first whammy was the taste; the second was the effect. The excitement in a venture like this was something only mountain climbers and sky-divers might understand: there was no guarantee of surviving the ordeal; it was man against nature, man against fate. Uncle Willie had been at a hobo convention of sorts in the summer of 1987 where a man known as Fan-Belt tried the stuff once too often. Fan-Belt was widely known throughout the Southwest because of his ingenious panhandling device. Constantly carrying a broken fan belt in his hand, he would accost drivers at stoplights and beg for a dollar or two. The wife and kids are roasting in the car, he would lament, I gotta buy a new fan belt. Rumors about Fan-Belt

claimed he was worth almost twenty thousand when he died that day at the hobo convention.

And man, did he ever die happy. Before drinking the stuff he bade farewell to his friends—as tradition dictated—spread his belongings to be divided among them, took off his shoes in case he should kick or thrash and injure someone, and his shirt in case he should puke on it. Sitting Indian-style under a burning New Mexican sun, his beloved railcars casting broad shadows in the background, he purged and pried open his Aqua-Net, offered a toast, took a breath, and tipped it to his lips. He drank it all in six gulps.

His screams caused the other hobos to cover their ears. Water shot from his eyes and his skin grew ghastly pale. He tried to stand, tore out his hair, staggered around a bit with his knuckles dragging the ground like a gorilla, and began to laugh. And laugh.

Someone timed him on a stolen Bulova. He laughed for six minutes—insane, wild, gleeful laughter that infected the whole convention. Soon everyone was laughing. It reminded the former Wallace Pickerford Gimley of the death scene of Mercutio, Romeo's friend who was laughed at even as he died, mortally pierced through the heart.

The time came that Fan-Belt fell and laughed no more. Silence dropped upon the crowd. All strained forward, hushed and expectant; Fan-Belt's pallored face was wet with the tears of his former glee. A hobo pushed his way through the crowd and knelt at his side. He touched Fan-Belt's neck. The hobo turned a twisted, horrified face to the crowd as he stood. He picked up the can of Aqua-Net and held it high for all to see. His voice cracking, he pronounced the dreadful news: Fan-Belt had perished, a martyr to his ideals.

Uncle Willie had stood mute with respect while the others scrambled for his belongings. A single tear stained his cheek.

This is how Uncle Willie remembered it. He also remembered dinner at the White House. Physically hale and hearty, his brain was nevertheless well down the road to ruin.

He was bringing the can to his mouth when brief thunder rolled across the prairie. The wind picked up in a sudden gust. *Trouble tonight,* Willie thought, and a chill worked its way up his spine. *God's mad about something.*

It was when the running black figure of a man burst out of the dark to the right that he dropped his can of Aqua-Net. It was when the man pounded his way toward him on a direct collision course that Uncle Willie struggled to stand. It was when he heard the man's ragged, labored breathing that he turned and tried to run from the apparition, but it was too late.

The two collided. Uncle Willie uttered a huge squawk as he was

thrown against the gas station’s wall. His can of hair spray rattled away while his funny papers ballooned upward and were snatched by the wind. The Twinkie in his pocket would never be the same. The other man spun twice with his arms flapping and careened into the station’s single gas pump. The hose popped out of its cradle and thunked on the pavement, releasing a short belch of gasoline. Uncle Willie groaned, slumped to the ground, tried to rise again, and lost consciousness. The stranger did the same.

Above, new thunder rippled through the black night sky as the moon was overtaken by clouds, and extinguished completely.

3

It was nearly eleven-thirty when Sheriff Parnell Tupper finally arrived at the scene of the crash on Highway 47. He had been snug in bed (and pleased to stay there for the rest of his life, thank you) when Mavis called from HQ in Junction City to roust him, demolishing a very nice dream in progress and setting the stage for a lousy night. Something about a fender-bender out near Wormwood, that boarded-up pile of shit that still dared to call itself a town. While his wife snored her usual symphony in B-flat, Tupper had rolled out of bed, propped his considerable bulk on his skinny legs, and staggered to the bathroom to unload a day's worth of piss. Ever since the wife, Adelia, had decided to go to business school, he had been forced to stay home during the days to babysit Chuckie, the five-year-old rug-rat that Adelia swore he was the father of, but looked suspiciously like the next-door neighbor, red hair and all. Tupper hated night-shift work worse than he hated rattlesnakes, but Adelia knew how to lay down the law. Besides, when she graduated from school she might land a job and he could cut to part-time.

Up and about, he had thought about taking a shower, then said to hell with it. He thought about changing into a fresh uniform, then said to hell with it. He went downstairs and thought about taking Chuckie someplace for a DNA test, but it was too late to find any open labs, so to hell with that too.

In the end he drove through Junction City and caught Highway 47 south. It took some twenty minutes just to get to where Deputy Bob Martel's cruiser was sitting dead on the road with all its Christmas lights flashing. There was a pall of smoke in the air that smelled bad. Tupper eyed the wreck as he pulled up and stopped.

"Jesus frigging Christ," he grunted, fetched his official Diamond County flashlight off the floorboard, and got out. Deputy Martel had put orange flares all over the road and was standing just past the wreck waving directions at an approaching car. He looked back and nodded, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder: Look at what I found, boss.

Tupper looked. A thought popped instantly into his head, the memory of seeing the space shuttle explosion live on TV. These two cars had exploded then melted together. Red-hot sheet metal glowed at the base of it. The tires were still burning; pools of steaming glass

were hardening on the asphalt, which itself had burned up some. Tupper ducked, squinting. One of the fried license plates indicated New Jersey, a hell of a long way to drive just to die in a crash in New Mexico. He skirted the wreckage. This plate might say New York, might not, since it had curled up like a pretzel.

He went to the nearest car and shined his light inside. He had seen incinerated bodies before but it was never pleasant. Considering the amount of heat still pressing out from the debris, the temperature must have been upward of two-thousand degrees at its peak. But whoever had been inside wouldn't have minded one bit; these bodies would be found in chunks and pieces that had nothing to do with the fire.

Martel wandered over. "Suppose we ought to call an ambulance?"

Tupper looked at him. Below his mirror sunglasses Martel was grinning like a baboon. He loved this kind of stuff, being the eager beaver and all that. It was probably the closest thing to a war he had ever seen. Tupper had heard all his tales about the artillery. There could never be enough bombs in the world for Bob Martel.

"Call for a wrecker," Tupper told him. "Tell them there's no hurry, though—this mess is going to be hot for another hour or two. Have you done your diagram?"

"Diagram?" Martel quit grinning. "I have to diagram this?"

"How about the accident report? Done that yet?"

He shifted uneasily. "I been directing traffic. I'll do them later."

"Any witnesses to this?"

Martel shrugged. "Just me, I guess."

"You guess?"

He squared his shoulders. "Just me. I was chasing them down."

"So you were involved. You'll need a form 286."

"No problem."

Tupper nodded. "Any luck finding body parts? Anything ejected? We don't want the coyotes dragging some guy's head away."

"Well now," Martel said, frowning, "there was some kind of ejection. The guy in the convertible"—he pointed to it—"jumped out just before impact. I think he rolled down into the ditch there."

Tupper looked. "So where's he at now?"

"Burned up, I guess. At least, there ain't nothing down there anymore."

"What do you mean, nothing? Bodies don't just burn up. The skeleton can't vanish. Go look some more."

Martel heaved out a sigh. "Fine, I got nothing else to do. I don't get

off at midnight or nothing." He stomped away.

"Keep an eye out for parts of other people," Tupper called after him. "We want to keep this tidy."

"Ain't going to be no others," Martel said over his shoulder. "The guy in the Cadillac already headed east."

Tupper almost choked. "Come again?"

Deputy Martel turned. He scratched his hat, looking befuddled. "That's funny. I almost forgot all about it." He ambled back, frowning, looking suddenly groggy. "This guy comes out of the wreck, and he asks me which way the other guy went, so I says east, and he says thank you, and he walks away."

Now Tupper frowned. Martel was no bomb-dropping wannabe war hero. This wreck had put him straight into shock. He took him by the arm. "Come on, Bob, we better sit down a minute."

Martel let himself be led. "Whuffor?"

"I've got a bottle of water in my car, straighten you right out. You say a man walked away from the crash?"

"Uh-huh. He was all smoky and his hair was still on fire, but he was *real* nice. That's why I can't figure out why the other fella was shooting at him."

Tupper took a long breath as he walked. Iron-Man Martel had watched one too many war movie. "You looky here," he said. "You did a good job on the flares and we can leave for a while. What you need now is a lot of rest, maybe a nice cool shower."

"My shift's about over anyway," Martel said. "I do feel kinda funny all of a sudden. I'll just drive straight home."

"No driving for you," Tupper said. He passed the old Galaxy that was all lit up red and blue and white, enough warning for any traffic tonight that this was official police business, and fed Martel into the passenger seat of his own cruiser. He got in behind the wheel and deliberated for a moment. Take Bob all the way back to Junction City? That would be almost a whole hour down the drain. Wormwood was only a mile or two away, but jeez . . . Wormwood? The only place to bed down Bob's screwball self there was the Mission Inn, which was barely one step up from a camping trailer in a junkyard. But he could rest there, take a bath there, sleep off the stress of his first real crash.

"Ah, why the hell not," he muttered, and drove away hoping Bob Martel wouldn't flip out totally and start thinking he was a chicken or Napoleon or something.

* * *

At the outskirts of Wormwood, home of the worms and not much else

(to Tupper's way of thinking), while rattling along the gravel road dodging chuckholes and collapsed barbed-wire fences, the sheriff spotted something else out of the ordinary. Under the glare of his headlights, walking determinedly at the left of the road and looking quite the cowboy, was a tall man wearing a long yellow duster coat and a classic Stetson. The heels of his snakeskin boots gleamed like oiled glass as he walked. In one hand he held a small case of some sort, perhaps his toilet items if he needed to stop and freshen up before continuing to hike the remaining five-hundred miles across the desert toward Mexico.

Bob Martel, who had been drowsing, perked up. "Naw, it ain't him," he said after a beat. "Maybe it's the other one."

Tupper had no idea which was supposed to be which, but flashed the overhead light bar on and off a couple times anyway. The man stopped and turned. Tupper idled up and rolled his window down a few more inches. "How do," he said by way of greeting when the dust had settled.

"Have you seen him?" the man asked immediately. He had a long, somewhat triangular face, dark hair, generic eyes, no apparent criminal intent—just another tall guy wearing eight-hundred bucks worth of cowboy clothes, hiking through the night on the outskirts of Wormwood. Happened all the time.

"Seen who?" Tupper ventured.

Bob Martel perked up again. "It *is* you," he said, leaning across the seat and sticking his face an inch away from Tupper's ear. "You, except . . . where'd you get the clothes?"

Sheriff Tupper and the stranger made eye contact again. Silent agreement ensued: the deputy was bonkers. Tupper pushed Martel back with a shove of his elbow. "Let me do this," he snapped. To the stranger: "Did you witness a car wreck about a half hour ago? Out on the highway?"

He nodded. "I did."

"Did you see anyone jump out at the last minute?"

He nodded again. "That would be the man I'm looking for."

"You saw this man jump out? You were close enough to see?"

The stranger put a hand on the top of the car and began to drum his fingers there, thumpa-thumpa-thumpa. "Of course I was. I was in the Cadillac."

Tupper looked at Martel, who was gnawing on a fingernail now, and back to the cowboy. "You came out of that explosion alive?"

"That would be impossible. I was able to get out before the gas tanks exploded."

"But your car was totaled. *Worse* than totaled."

"I explained this to your partner already. Rather than ask me why I'm not as dead as you'd like, ask me why I have to find Brayker, and find him tonight."

Tupper blinked. "Baker?"

"Brayker. B-R-A-Y-K-E-R."

"Yeah, okay, I got it." Tupper ran a hand over his face, feeling worse than he had when Mavis rang his telephone to fire the starter-gun for this stupid night. "Hop on in, we can clear this up in town."

The stranger opened the back door and climbed in. Bob Martel turned and eyed him up and down, mumbling to himself, until Tupper poked a finger hard against his thigh and mouthed a couple *shutups.*

The stranger leaned forward to speak to the back of Tupper's head as the sheriff gave gas for the last leg to Wormwood. "He's a very dangerous man, Brayker is," he said. "He's a murderer and a thief."

Tupper ducked a little as he drove. The man's breath wafting around his head smelled a lot like burnt rubber. Eight hundred bucks worth of clothes, Tupper thought, and he can't afford a breath mint. "Please don't be telling me you're a cop," Tupper groaned. "Please don't tell me you're some kind of New York detective chasing the Mafia into Diamond County."

"Actually, I'm just a salesman."

"Salesman, eh? Okay, Mister Salesman, what drove you all the way from the east coast into New Mexico?" *And if he says "My Cadillac drove me",* Tupper thought darkly, *I will be forced to arrest him.*

"Mr. Brayker stole something of great value," he said instead. "A valuable antique that is worth an enormous amount to me, and if he is anywhere near one of your quaint little towns, bad things will begin to happen. Dangerous things."

Tupper let his eyes drift shut for a moment. Thieves, murderers, salesmen—what's the difference?

A voice squawked on the police channel. Tupper got the mike and thumbed the button. "Go ahead, Mavis."

The radio was no top-of-the-line Motorola or RCA job, but he was used to its garbled crackling. "That's a ten-four," he said, and looked in the rearview mirror. Reflected from the back seat, the Salesman's eyes were bright circles, his eyebrows arched with interest. "That was HQ," Tupper said. "Somebody just tried to steal a car out of the Eureka Cafe parking lot."

The Salesman frowned. "Where might that be?"

"Well," Tupper said, "it might be in Wormwood. And that might be the hole-in-the-wall town just up ahead. And it might be that your

thief is already doing his dirtiest. Works fast, don't he?"

The Salesman smiled a thin, satisfied smile. "Very fast, Sheriff. May I say the same for your driving now?"

"You may," Tupper replied primly, and poured on the gas.

Uncle Willie had done some passing out in his life, and had later awakened to some hangovers that would drop an elephant like a bullet between the eyes, but this one, as he awakened from a nap of no more than twenty or thirty seconds, was right up there among the top ten. The top five, even. Aqua-Net hangovers were a special piece of hell always reserved for the topmost slots.

He was staggering to his feet while assorted horses and mules kicked him in the head, or so it seemed. Crazy lights danced inside his eyeballs and his ears were full of steam engines chugging away and atomic bombs going off at random. When he realized he was erect, he slumped against the nearest object—the gas station—and began giving serious thought to religion, perhaps even Mormonism or Christian Science.

A few yards away, another shape was coming to its feet. The smell of spilled gasoline was in the wind. A flicker of distant lightning exposed the scene for a millisecond: Willie cracked an eye open in time and saw a dead gas station bedecked with errant newspaper comics, tumbleweeds, and a flapping sandwich-board sign that proclaimed gas to be $1.64 a gallon.

Propped against the wall, he opened his mouth and spit out a blot of something salty. He remembered being scared, remembered being hit by a car or falling tree. He lifted a hand and clutched his forehead against the forces that wanted it to split wide open. A car? A tree? His upper lip was torn and bleeding on the inside and a hot spot on the side of his head spoke of goose-eggs and concussions, brain hemorrhages, approaching death. Worse, his can of hair spray had rolled all the way to the street and left a long wet line of heaven behind it.

"Shhsssmmmm . . ." he grunted. "Shsssmmm-shism-shit. Shit! My head! My *head!* Ow! *Ow!"*

The other shape in the dark was on its feet now. Its shoes scraped on the asphalt as it wobbled upright and dragged itself, inexorably, toward Uncle Willie once more. One outstretched hand had a tiny spot on the palm that shone and winked with a hideous, greenish light of its own.

"Devil!" Willie screamed at it. The wind tore at his ragged clothes and stood his white hair on end. "Devil!"

The figure tottered to the right and slumped against the building a few steps away. It sagged an inch or two and said: "Didn't see you in the dark, old fella. Sorry."

Uncle Willie hesitated, mentally pocketing a whole string of imprecations that might have captured him the hobo equivalent of an Emmy. He breathed easier, then clutched wildly at a pocket buried inside his wadded clothes. There was a pint of whiskey in there—and it was not broken. He fumbled it out with shaking fingers and partook of a long series of gargle-sounding swigs. "I could sue you," he wheezed as he replaced the cap and ran his tongue over his lacerated lip, which now burned like Drano in the old eyeball. Beloved booze began immediately to wash through his system, erasing the remnants of panic. "However, I like courts and lawyers about as much as I like spiders in my shoes when I put them on. Care to drink with me?"

The dark and frightening figure stepped close and, even in the bad light, became an ordinary man. He had a bloody nose that he swiped at with a sleeve as he took Willie's bottle and regarded it. "Whiskey," he said. Lightning hit the sky again and in its brief glow Uncle Willie saw deep holes for eyes, the urgent need of some shaving cream and a razor, and dark and dirty lines of soot smeared like warpaint along the lines of that face, which was not a very old face at all. The man put the spout of the bottle in his mouth and tipped his head back. One, two, three swallows, and he was done. Willie thanked the gods of mercy as it was handed back. Since the hair spray was gone this little bottle was the only thing that stood between him and death by sobriety. What a kind stranger, to have drank so little.

"So," Willie said, now that a bond of friendship was established, "what brings a young man like yourself here to Wormwood? And at such speed?"

The man touched his nose again. "Wormwood, eh? Quaint. Real quaint. Gimme that bottle."

Willie started to protest, but the unwritten law among professional scavengers dictated that a man may drink twice of your bottle when offered it once, but no more. Willie handed the bottle over without enthusiasm, and watched while a good inch of it went down the other man's gullet.

"I need a place to bed down," the man said after lowering the bottle to the height of his belt. "Know any place I could do that?"

"Bed down?" Willie's eyes were locked onto the bottle. Barely three, maybe four inches left. Did this man know what he was doing? Was he King of the Road enough to know the rules? "There's but one public house left in Wormwood," Willie said. "It's called the Mission Inn. I can direct you to it from here."

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Willie began pointing around. A hint of thunder crawled across the tossing sky as if unsure which way it should go; more lightning erected tiny ladders far out on the prairie beyond the town. “You see that sign? It used to be a grocery store. One block past it is the building that used to be a motel before they re-routed the highway and put us off the beaten track. There you would take a left and look for Mission Street in about six, maybe seven blocks. The street signs have mostly fallen but you can tell Mission Street because . . .”

His voice trailed off. The dark stranger with the weird shiny dot on his palm had hoisted the bottle to his lips in a sudden move and was drinking again. “See here,” Willie snapped. “I offered you a drink in the name of friendship, yet here you stand swilling my liquor like root beer.”

The man lowered the bottle and eyed Willie. “Take me there,” he said.

Willie straightened. “What?”

“Take me there.” He gripped the bottle by the neck and waved it in front of Willie’s face, sloshing its delicate innards. “Take me to your godforsaken hotel. Let me close my eyes and sleep until I die.”

Willie took a backward step. “Sir, you only have to walk nine or ten blocks from where we stand and you will be there.”

“Be *where?”* he shouted, advancing a step. “Where it might be *safe?* Where I can *rest?* Where I do not have to deal with *this* every moment of my life?”

His free hand swung up and stopped a few inches in front of Willie’s face. The one dot of green light pulsated, pulsated, then shifted slightly. It went out.

“And I,” the man said wearily as he dropped his hand and looked at it, “must once again fight unto the death.”

Willie stood mute. This was a lunatic facing him here, a young man carrying a host of demons in his soul. Many hobos finally went senile or insane after years of bad booze and lousy nutrition he knew, but for this poor fellow the time had come far too early. Overdoses of hair spray could well be the culprit.

“Okay,” Willie said, straightening his shoulders. “I will take you to the Mission. They know me there, and you will get a bed.”

With a sudden move of his arm, the man gave up possession of the bottle of whiskey by thumping it against Willie’s chest. “I only ask for one night’s sleep,” he muttered, hanging his head. “One night’s sleep before we all die.”

Willie took the bottle. He put one gnarled hand on the stranger’s

shoulder but immediately felt sheepish and let it fall. “Oh, just follow me,” he said. “You got a name I can use?”

“Brayker,” he said. “There’s a Y in it. Brayker with a Y. And for God’s sake, it isn’t Baker. I swear it isn’t Baker. Don’t ever call me Baker.”

“Never have and never will,” Uncle Willie said, and aimed himself toward the abandoned grocery store that would lead to the abandoned motel, which would lead to Mission Street, where the sign that proclaimed its name had long ago fallen down and would never rise again.

They walked. For lack of anything to say, Willie told him tales of his olden days as an investor in silver mines, up to the part where the truth got blurry and the booze took over, but this guy Brayker—and don’t ever call him Baker—didn’t seem to be listening, so when the rain began to drizzle down, Willie decided to shut up and went to work on his last few inches of whiskey.

4

Danny Long, who had been so proud of himself for stopping the theft of his parent's Bronco at the Eureka Cafe, was not the only young person dying a slow death in the decayed remains of Wormwood, New Mexico, where everybody left and nobody bothered to come back. The name attached to her probation file identified her as Jeryline A. Bascombe, twenty-year-old white female with a record of many enterprising activities such as robbery, burglary, grand theft auto, and possession of controlled substances, to mention a few. In a big city such a record would have surprised few, but in the tiny towns of the Southwest this kind of behavior was utterly scandalous. Eighteen months in prison had hardened Jeryline a little around the edges, and taught her a lot. Lesson One, don't trust anybody. Lesson Two, don't ever, *ever* wind up in prison again. Even if it means being a paid slave at the Mission Inn in Wormwood.

And it amounted to slavery, really. As part of her work release/ probation, Jeryline was paid two dollars and thirty cents an hour to be the Mission's maid, cook, laundry worker, desk clerk, delivery driver, groundskeeper, and cleaning lady. The owner of the Mission Inn was Irene Galvin, who liked hiring WR/P's because they would work long and hard, too long and too hard, just to stay out of prison. If not for the cheap labor, Jeryline had decided long ago, the Mission Inn would be out of business in a month. Less, even.

One thing that helped keep the Mission alive at all was the fact that the building itself was a defunct Baptist church that Irene Galvin had bought, interest-free on a home-drawn contract, for almost nothing per month. Irene was a shrew and a hag and a bunch of other nasty stuff, but she was cunning. The only people left in the town were the poorest, the ones who had no house to sell, no job to relocate to, no future. They couldn't afford to move away, didn't have anyone to rent an apartment from as everything in Wormwood folded, and needed a place to stay until Lady Luck might spirit them away to a better life. A boardinghouse, then. Irene Galvin saw the need for a boardinghouse, bought the church for pennies, had it remodeled in exchange for the carpenter's room and board for a year, and set up shop. How she had latched onto the idea of using work-release cons as labor, Jeryline would never know. The nearest women's prison was clear off in Colorado. Perhaps they ran newspaper ads.

Tonight, as life at the Mission Inn was winding towards bedtime, Jeryline was, as ordered, wiping down the big dining table with Lemon Pledge. Irene Galvin had acquired the idea that Lemon Pledge was an antiseptic. Irene Galvin had a lot of blank spaces in her brain, for someone so smart. Jeryline was wearing her usual jeans and cowboy shirt as she worked, and the usual canvas apron Irene made her wear. She was not a bad-looking girl—had been a junior varsity cheerleader in school before kissing *that* whole scene goodbye—but with her yellow hair tied up in a greasy bandana, her face *sans* makeup and shiny with sweat, she looked stooped and middle-aged.

The current house guests were parked in front of the old round-tube color TV Irene had picked up at a yard sale years before. The sound didn't work anymore but the boarders were used to it. From what Jeryline was picking up as conversation ebbed and flowed in front of the ancient Philco, one of the long-term boarders, screwy little Wally Enfield, had gotten fired today from his post office job in Lost Mesa. This was tragic news both to Wally, and to Irene. If one or two more boarders headed for greener pastures, the Mission Inn would financially wash ashore like a dead mackerel on a beach. Which might mean back to the pokey with Jeryline.

"But Wally," the only female resident was saying, "how could they fire you? You didn't *do* anything!"

Wally had sunk himself into a corner of the sofa, and if he sunk himself any lower in his distress, Jeryline thought wickedly, only his shoes would be poking up. "That's what I told them," Wally whined. "I don't know what happened to all that mail. Far as I know, it just disappeared."

The female resident, whom Jeryline could barely stand, was Cordelia Jackson, the former elementary school teacher who became a prostitute as soon as the school closed its doors. And perhaps long before, it had been said. "It is simply unjust," she hummed to the demoralized Wally. "A man like you. A man like you!"

Wally covered his face with his hands and spoke through his fingers. "God, it was so humiliating. The postmaster ripped off my name tag right in front of everyone. And then, like it wasn't bad enough, he took my Mr. Zippy patch and cut it up with scissors."

"Intolerable," Cordelia Jackson said in a voice husky with righteousness. "You should have told him to go screw himself. You should have reported him to the Postmaster General. You still could, too."

It was then that Irene breezed in from inspecting the kitchen Jeryline had just finished scrubbing down. Bulging fatly in all the wrong places in her antiquated green pantsuit, she crossed in front of

the television while maneuvering two toothpicks between her lips. “Wally,” she said loudly, “if you’ve got any sense you’ll crawl your ass back there in the morning and beg God above for your job back. People are killing each other for post office jobs. You’ve read the papers.”

“Actually,” Wally said, “those killings were of a different nature.”

“Nature, shmature,” Irene snorted. “Go back to your boss and offer to suck some body parts.”

Cordelia nodded. “It never hurts to grease the wheels.”

Jeryline almost laughed out loud. Bent over while sanitizing the chairs, she managed to package it into a large and sloppy cough.

Cordelia, who had most surely sucked a few body parts since giving up teaching, snapped her head around. “Don’t be laughing at him, Jeryline Jailbait Bascombe. Have you got my sheets washed yet?”

Jeryline raised her head. “Yep, they’re all downstairs. I couldn’t get the stains all the way out, though. The whole mess looks kind of . . . green.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes. “Never again will I work with guacamole, no matter how much he pays me. And Jeryline?”

Jeryline stood erect, hating the smell of the Pledge and quite willing to set the rag on fire if asked. The table too, come to think of it. “Yeah?”

Cordelia smiled one of her phony smiles at her. “I’ve got a date coming here real soon,” she said. “Be a sport and put the sheets on my bed while I freshen up.”

“All in good time,” Jeryline said. “After this I’ve still got the stove to clean.”

Irene, who had plopped her green-suited self on the sofa beside Wally and was going at her teeth with both of her toothpicks, pulled her eyes away from the silent TV long enough to bark a command: “Paying customers are always right, Jeryline. Put the goddamn sheets on Cordelia’s bed before her boyfriend shows up.”

Jeryline allowed her eyes to go out of focus, turning everything inside the Mission Inn to a blur of mismatched colors with the voiceless TV a bright spot of flashing lights just to the right. This place was like a nuthouse most of the time: Cordelia was a cheap whore with visions of Hollywood and its money and scandals, Irene was a cheap boarding-house owner, Wally Enfield was a weasely little shit who had been unjustly and terribly fired from every job he’d ever had. There were four other residents, two of them now missing for three days and assumed in jail again, the other two gone off on some madcap venture prospecting for silver in an area that had been

stripped clean of silver and everything else before the turn of the century. They could all show up at any time and demand food. Who would be rousted from bed to cook it? The big J.

Wally Enfield decided now to uproot himself from the sofa and become the rescuer of a damsel in distress. “I will get your sheets for you,” he said regally to Cordelia as he stood. “And, I will put them on your bed.”

Cordelia eyed him. “That’s a sweetheart,” she said uncertainly. “Go ahead and do that, get those sheets.” She looked over to Jeryline. “Isn’t he just sweet? Isn’t he?”

Jeryline finished wiping the last chair and shoved it into place. “Wally,” she announced without much enthusiasm, “you are the sweetest of the sweet. The laundry is in the basement.”

He blushed to the top of his balding little head, and got interested in the tips of his shoes. Cordelia touched a finger to her chin and stared at him while mental gears seemed to be at work behind her eyes. “Isn’t he just the sweetest?” she murmured wonderingly. “Isn’t he?”

Irene, who had been busy picking her teeth with her dual toothpicks, went for a rearward molar while raising a leg to let a short, shrill fart whistle between her legs. “Sweet,” she grunted. “Oh so sweet.”

Wally wandered away, becoming so lobster red with embarrassment that Jeryline feared a tourniquet around his neck might be necessary soon. Cordelia squealed out a twitter of laughter. “Did you ever see such?” she asked, slapping the arm of the couch. “Did you? I should give him a freebie. And you know? If Roach doesn’t show up tonight, I will. You bet I will.”

“Just what little Wally needs,” Irene muttered back. “Getting screwed again.”

A gust of damp air kicked across Jeryline’s shins, followed by the spiritless clanking of the cowbell hanging above the front door. A familiar pile of rags walked in: Uncle Willie. Trailing him was a stranger whose thick black hair had been worked into knots by the wind, whose clothes were dirtier than most, whose face was tight and distrusting. An image sprang instantly into her mind: prison guard. Tough, weary, and sick of it all.

“Well, looka here!” Uncle Willie brayed as the doorspring tried to pull the door shut against the weather. “Gangway, I’m bringing in business!”

Cordelia frowned, eyeing the stranger. “What kind of business? *My* kind of business?”

"Well, actually," Willie said, "more like Irene's business. He's looking for a private room."

Jeryline watched Irene Galvin push herself off the couch to greet the sight of a new paying customer. "Why, Uncle Willie," Irene giggled, and stroked his hairy cheek as she rounded past him. "Had I known you would be bringing me some business, I never would have said the things I did. Do forgive me."

Willie frowned. "What things? What?"

"And how shall I register you?" she asked the man. "Monthly? Yearly? There is no better long-term accomodation in New Mexico than the friendly family here at Mission Inn. Are you new to the area?"

"Just give me a room," he said. Jeryline noticed a thin crust of dried blood under his nose, as if he had been in a fight and scrubbed at it a lot. He ran a hand through his hair. "A bed, a room, one night, two nights, bill me later."

Irene Galvin snapped suddenly into her more familiar personality. "I don't do short-term rents, mister. This is not a motel where you check in and then out. I serve meals here, I have an entertainment center here, and I have to make a profit here in order to survive. One week minimum, paid in advance."

The man took a slow, purposeful breath. Across the room, Jeryline was already writing the whole episode off and mentally preparing herself to tackle the cleaning of the stove. Irene had chased one-nighters away before. It was nothing new.

"Here," she heard the stranger say. "You want what, fifty? Two-fifty? Ten thousand goddamn fifty? *Here!*"

He raked a hand in and out of his jeans pocket as fast as a gunslinger unlimbering a Colt .45. The wad of bills he pulled out was very round and very fat. Jeryline almost gasped. The visible ones were fifties, a couple others looked like hundreds as they lazily uncoiled from the roll in his open hand. She had never seen a thousand dollar bill, but guessed there might be a few at the core of such a treasure.

Irene, acting as if this took place every single day, remained prim: "One-hundred dollars per night will be fine, sir." She plucked at the sheaf of bills, her bony little fingers tweezing and pecking like the beak of a chicken. "Jeryline!" she barked when she was done. "Show this gentleman to the available room."

Jeryline propped her hands on her hips. "I thought cleaning the stove was a matter of life and death."

Irene swept the man toward the front desk, produced for him a guest register—which had never seen the light of day at all during the

entire five months Jeryline had worked here—and produced enough verbal syrup to coax him into signing it. When he laid the pen down, Irene raised a hand over her head and began snapping her fingers. "Jeryline? Jeryline dear? Show Mr. Brayker to his room, please. Number Five should be perfect."

Jeryline put the Lemon Pledge down on the table, wiped the palms of her hands on the sides of her jeans, and became the Mission Inn bellboy, which she had not known, until now, was part of her work-release/probation agreement. Amazing how varied and sundry such programs were, and how they could expand themselves into a bit of everything. In a few years she could head the Wormwood city council as the local work-release mayor—as if Wormwood *had* a city council, har-har.

"This way to the presidential suite," she groused. "Any carry-on luggage for this flight, Mr. Brayker?"

Irene clicked her tongue. "Jeryline, loose lips sink work-release ships. Keep your smart-mouth to yourself. And see to it that Mr. Brayker gets some supper."

"Yes ma'am," Jeryline said curtly. "Mr. Brayker? Walk this way."

She turned and goose-stepped a couple paces. Looking back for a grin from Brayker, she got only a cold, dead stare. "Mr. Congeniality he ain't," she muttered under her breath, and hiked up the stairs.

Room Five was down the short hallway to the right. She whisked the door open and snapped on the light. Brayker pushed past her and stalked to the window. He studied the night for a moment.

"Let's see," Jeryline said, tapping her chin. "Breakfast starts at seven, maybe later if I oversleep. The bathroom's just down the hall."

"What am I looking at here?" Brayker said to the glass. He tapped at it. "Which direction is the highway?"

"Uh, forty-seven? Or sixteen east-west?"

"Forty-seven."

She walked up beside him and pointed, squatting a few inches to see. "Couple of miles that way. But notice the fine view? This elegant suite features a splendid morning view of nothing. Ditto for afternoons, and the evening view is especially nothing."

He looked at her as if puzzled. She reddened; no sense of humor whatsoever, the jerk.

"Why are you here?" he asked suddenly.

She arched her eyebrows. "Why? To show you the room."

Brayker reached and clamped a cold hand around her forearm. "Not that. Why the hell are you here? What's here for you?"

"Just a job," she said, shying away.

"You were in jail," he said. His dark eyes were shiny and emotionless. "What did you do?"

Jeryline frowned at him, the nosy bastard. "Felonious bed-wetting. Why are *you* here?"

He looked back to the window, where the wind was kicking raindrops past the eaves to speckle the glass. "I think," he stated wearily, "that I am here for the same reason you are."

She snorted. "Bed-wetting? Simply rampant these days."

He waved her away with a flick of his hand. "Get out of here and make me some supper. I want a beer with it, too. Got that?"

She strode to the door. "Got that. And by the way, you can go to hell."

"Been there," he said.

She slammed the door.

Suppertime.

The usual crew had eaten hours before, large cube steaks, steamed potatoes, gravy, asparagus, dinner rolls, lemon meringue pie for dessert. The leftovers were pretty skimpy, and Jeryline wanted to make sure Mr. Brayker got enough, so she added a cup of flour to the blender while it churned his entire supper into pudding. She located a large bowl, filled it with the beige-colored Jeryline Special, and poked a sprig of fresh parsley into the middle. "Superb," she crooned, sniffing it.

Mr. Brayker was already at the table. He had washed up and tamed his hair a little, but his clothes were unchanged and his beard stubble was still stubbly. Jeryline breezed out of the kitchen and dropped the bowl and a spoon in front of him. When she cruised back with a glass of water, he was eating, slowly and deliberately, his eyes fixed on an invisible spot on the table. She parked the water at his elbow. She curtsied.

"Is everything satisfactory, Mr. Brayker?"

He cranked his head to look at her. "I wanted a beer," he said.

She smiled. "And you got water. Enjoy."

She joined Uncle Willie and Cordelia at the two sofas aimed at the television, where a black-and-white rerun of "The Fugitive" was soundlessly airing. Willie and Cordelia were staring at Brayker as if he were the most interesting thing within a hundred miles. He noticed and lifted his bowl. "You two want some, or what?" he said flatly.

Cordelia turned her attention back to the television. Uncle Willie winked. "No thanks, not me. I was just thinking about how much

better that stuff looked when it was roadkill."

Jeryline covered her mouth with her hands and laughed into them. Mr. Brayker was a weird character and if he thought the two of them had some kind of common bond, that their meeting here was dictated by fate, well then, he was weird *and* crazy.

Though the wind outside was hooting and groaning around the building, and the rain was noisily pattering against the roof and windows, Jeryline heard a car crunch its way over the gravel parking area, and stop. It had the peculiar squeak-rattle of a Volkswagen, she thought. One door thumped shut. One of the roomers back from wherever-the-hell? Or a customer for Cordelia's bedroom talents?

Brayker had heard it too. She watched as he tensed up, saw a hand go into the pocket of his dirty jacket. His gaze welded itself to the front door. This man, she realized without surprise, was a man of many secrets. Maybe even an escaped mental patient from the cuckoo house over in Cactus Flowers.

Something black blurred through the bottom of her vision without warning. It zipped up onto the table beside Brayker, froze in place, and became Irene's cat Cleo.

Brayker burst up from his chair in a wild scramble, knocking it over and nearly upsetting the table. His bowl of Jeryline Special wobbled near the edge but, thankfully, did not fall off. With one enormous sweep of his arm Brayker shoved the cat off the table, his face twisted up with revulsion and alarm.

Irene appeared out of nowhere in time to witness this. She aimed her eyes at Jeryline. "Didn't I tell you to put the cat out? Didn't I?"

Jeryline snapped right back at her: "I did. I don't know how she keeps getting back in. Besides, she's your stupid cat, not mine."

"Just get her out of here." Irene turned to Brayker and attached a smile to her mouth. "No harm done, Mr. Brayker? I'm sorry about the cat."

He set the chair back on its feet and sat down. His hands were visibly shaking. Jeryline wondered why. Allergic to cats? Or just afraid of his own shadow?

The doorbell chimed and Brayker leapt to his feet again, shoving his hand into his pocket where, no doubt, a small pistol was housed. Irene eyed him momentarily, then went to the door. It burst open before she could touch it. Wind and fog marched in along with a man wearing a yellow rain slicker. He had a wet paper bag in one hand with the top of a bottle sticking up. "She here?" he brayed. "Still up?"

Cordelia grinned. "Roach?" She jumped up from the couch and scurried to the door. "Roachie!" she wailed, and dumped herself into

his arms. “You kept me waiting,” she chided him after a couple of soupy kisses.

He handed the bag to her. “The meter ain’t running already, is it? Asides, this champagne ought to make it up.”

She winked at him and pulled the bottle out. Jeryline smirked. A four-dollar bottle of off-brand rotgut. Cordelia unscrewed the top and sniffed. “I get all bubbly,” she twittered.

“That’s just how I like you,” Roach said, and kissed her again. “Anyhows, the reason I’m late is a’cause somebody tried stealing Homer’s Bronco down at the cafe.”

Cordelia frowned, capping the bottle. “That old pile of shit?”

“Right from the parking lot. The sheriff is there right now, swear to God.”

“Mercy.” Jeryline saw Cordelia’s eyes shift over to Brayker and back. He had recovered and was going at supper again with his eyes cast down, watching nothing. Cordelia twitched her eyebrows at Roach and nodded slightly.

“Oh,” Roach said softly. He took her hand and urged her toward the stairway. “Let’s get us some privacy.”

Wally Enfield trudged in from the basement door toting a basket of folded sheets. He opened his mouth to say something to Cordelia, then saw that she was headed to the stairway with Roach. His face fell so fast Jeryline was afraid it might drop to the floor. Oh, the scourge of unrequited love.

“Well, come on, Wally,” Cordelia said, motioning to him. “Get those sheets on the bed like a dear boy.”

Wally uttered a great sigh and followed them up. Only a moment later Roach came down alone. “Hey, Irene?” he said, doing funny things with his eyes. “I gots to make a phone call.”

“Phone’s behind the desk,” she said.

“Not that one. This is personal business.”

Irene snorted. “As if walking up the stairs with the town hooker ain’t personal?”

Roach gritted his teeth and rolled his eyes.

“All right, use the one in the office.”

“Swell.” He headed away.

“Just don’t go getting it all smelled up with your booze breath,” she called after him, and plopped down on the sofa beside Jeryline. “Ever notice,” she said conversationally, “that everybody who meets the fugitive winds up helping him hide out?”

Jeryline looked again to Brayker. Hunched and silent, he seemed

oblivious to everything but his Jeryline Special. He was, she knew now with fair certainty, a fugitive himself. But it would be a cold day in hell before she ever helped him more than to just drive him to the city limits, say goodbye, and boot his rude ass out of the car.

5

It was only ten minutes later that the doorbell chimed again. In the kitchen, on her knees, wearing a pair of orange rubber gloves with her hair falling across her eyes, Jeryline was performing step one of the oven-cleaning task Irene had demanded earlier. She had hauled the racks out and hosed down the insides of the old Kenmore four-burner with oven cleaner, which smelled, she supposed, no different than the goop at the bottom of a toxic waste dump. Now, with the fumes making her blink and squint, she was scraping off the hideous yellow foam with a broad putty knife. Fun? She was ecstatic.

The Mission Inn's doorbell donged out a bit of clangy Beethoven music. Glad for any diversion, Jeryline used it as an excuse to leave the kitchen, as well as to give her lungs a reprieve from the chemical mix that was frying them. Irene was at the door already, and standing out under the awning with their clothes getting whipped into crazy shapes by the wind were County Sheriff Tupper, a deputy she did not know, and a cowboy wearing an ankle-length yellow duster that flapped in the storm.

Irene ushered them in and pressed the door shut. Brayker was already on his feet with his hand in his pocket. It was then that Jeryline got the whole picture: Roach had called the cops, for this Brayker man was the would-be car thief. It softened her opinion of him somewhat; she wasn't the only one here with a record. She stepped closer to the table to pick up the bowl and glass before a fight could break out, because if Brayker was anything like herself, he would not be taken easily. Sheriff Tupper said his hi's and howdy's to Irene and Uncle Willie and little Wally, included Jeryline at the end, and wiped the congenial smile off his pudgy face. He frowned and looked at the ceiling. So did everyone else. Overhead, Cordelia's bed was bouncing and squeaking at a steady pace, interspersed by an occasional, breathy moan.

"Sounds like Cordelia's hard at work," he grunted.

The cowboy took off his big hat and dropped it on the empty flowerpot by the door. His face was hard and wooden as he locked eyes with Brayker. In his eyes Jeryline saw contempt and hatred that had probably festered there for a long, long time. Brayker matched his stare, but a tinge of uncertainty colored his expression. She guessed a federal marshall and a big-time crook.

“Would you be Mr. Brayker?” Tupper asked, hooking his thumbs under his Sam Browne belt.

The cowboy nodded. “He would most definitely be Mr. Brayker.”

Brayker whipped his hand out of his jacket. Something clicked metallically. Presto, he had an open butterfly knife in his hand, and another presto, he had jumped at Jeryline and hooked an arm around her neck. God he moves fast, she thought dazedly, and felt the tip of his knife press against the soft area under her chin. The bowl and glass fell from her hands and shattered on the floor like two small bombs. Irene let out a shriek and backed into a corner with her fists mashed against her mouth.

“No guns or she dies,” he barked in Jeryline’s ear. “Get them out of your belts. Now!”

“Now you looky here,” Tupper said calmly, “nobody needs to be doing any shooting. Brayker, let Jeryline go and it won’t be mentioned anymore. You’re in enough trouble already, if what we’ve heard is true.”

“No way,” Brayker said. He was sweating and shaking as he gripped Jeryline tighter. He had, she noticed, a mild case of BO. And no wonder, wearing dirty clothes around. He lowered the knife enough to press it hard against her throat. “Drop those guns or I kill her. Simple as that.”

The cowboy stepped forward. “Sheriff, this man does not have the guts to kill anyone.”

“Hold it!” Tupper shouted at him. “I’m the negotiator here!”

“But there are no negotiations needed, can’t you understand? I can simply walk up and take the knife from him.”

“Freeze, Mister! Nobody said you had any authority here. And leaving the scene of an accident is a breech of the law in this state, so both of you have things to worry about.”

The Salesman groaned aloud. He stepped back. “Fine, good, whatever. Do your duty. I just want my merchandise back.”

Tupper turned his attention back to Brayker. Jeryline was aware of a strange sense of calm, or perhaps a sense of doom, wafting through her mind. Life had kicked her around a lot, and to die with her throat cut would be a fine capper for a miserable, hopeless existence. She had, for a while as a teenager, dabbled around with the idea of reincarnation, of dying and being born again as someone else. But with her luck, she had decided long ago, she would come back as her own unlucky self and have to wind up in prison again. Imagine that, endlessly repeating your own life. That would be a real, eternal, and inescapable Hell.

“Now, Mr. Brayker,” Tupper said evenly, “I want you to put the knife down. There is no need to spill blood over an attempted theft of a beat-up old Bronco. Do as I say, and let the girl go.”

Bob Martel, who had remained mute since arriving, perked up. “Asshole,” he growled, “are you deaf or just stupid? Drop it!”

Tupper made a motion: shut up. “Brayker, *put down the goddamn knife!”*

Jeryline felt every muscle in Brayker’s chest and arm become so taut that they were nearly humming like high-powered electric wires. “Her blood is on your head,” he grunted at Tupper, and raked the knife across her throat. She heard herself, to her own surprise, scream. Over in the corner by the stairway, Irene screamed as well. Brayker dropped Jeryline and she thudded heavily to her hands and knees, choking on . . .

on . . .

air.

She put her hands to her throat. Nothing. She raised herself up on her knees and saw that Brayker had lowered his head. She reached up and easily pulled the butterfly knife out of his hand.

“I got him,” Tupper shouted and thundered over, with the old floorboards squeaking and groaning under his weight. Jeryline rose up and staggered to the table, still clutching her throat with one hand, unable to believe that any of this had happened, unable to believe that she was not dead on the floor.

Sheriff Tupper jerked Brayker’s arms behind his back and rapidly snapped a set of handcuffs over his wrists. “S’cuse me, honey,” he said to Jeryline, and pushed her out of the way. He took a handful of the back of Brayker’s head and mashed his face to the table, simultaneously kicking his feet apart. He patted him down from top to bottom, jerked out his roll of money, then worked his way back up.

“Missed it the first time,” he said to himself, got Brayker upright again, and jerked something out of his shirt. Jeryline saw that it was a small and tattered leather pouch on a cord around his neck.

The cowboy—Jeryline remembered that Tupper had been calling him the Salesman—nodded at Tupper. “I believe you’ll find the stolen item in there, Sheriff.” He took a step, but Brayker immediately squalled a protest.

“You keep that bastard away from me!”

“Get yourself calm,” Tupper snapped, breathing hard. He pawed through the pouch. “Nothing. It’s empty.”

“Can’t be,” the Salesman said.

Tupper let the pouch drop. He laid the roll of money on the table,

shaking his head. “Salesman, who in the hell are you exactly?”

“I work for a collection agency. I repossess stolen artifacts. Antiques, like I told you.”

“So you both buy and sell antiques, and chase down people who rob your store. Couldn’t the police back east do that, so’s you don’t have to spend half your life on the road?”

The Salesman formed his hands into fists and began knocking his knuckles against each other. “The antique is somewhere in this building. It is made of bone and iron, is studded with silver rivets and mystic symbols, and was cast in the shape of a large key that is as big as your hand, an old skeleton-style key. It’s value is inestimable, Sheriff. For your benefit, that means expensive.”

“Thank you,” Tupper said coldly.

The Salesman reached into one of the huge pockets of his duster coat and withdrew a battered leather case about the size of a lunchbox. He flipped the latches and levered it open. The inside, Jeryline saw, was made of darkly ancient wood, where an indentation shaped like a huge key had been carved out. Formed into the head of it was an odd bulge, as if a gigantic pearl should be part of the ensemble.

“A piece of antiquity,” the Salesman said, snapping it shut. “Brayker has hidden it nearby. I guarantee it.”

Tupper nodded. “Bob,” he called. “Yo, Bob!”

The deputy had wandered to a window and was standing there like a mannequin, watching the storm. He turned. “What?”

“Get those damned sunglasses off for a change,” Tupper snapped at him. “Go upstairs and check the room for that key thing.”

“Key thing?” He peeled his glasses slowly off and stood befuddled. Though Jeryline had never met him before, it seemed that the man was into drugs of some sort. Shots, pills, nose candy, whatever. He looked at the Salesman and blinked a few times. “The key,” he said, and snapped his fingers. “Sure thing, boss.”

He charged up the stairs. “It’s Number Five,” Irene called to him. Somewhere along the line she had gotten herself behind the desk and was still crouched there. As Jeryline watched, she slowly rose up, a head, a pair of shoulders, a set of breasts, a waistline, all of it hidden from the neck down behind cheap green fabric cut in a style long since abandoned. “You asshole,” she hissed suddenly. She was looking at Brayker. “And to think I let you stay.”

The Salesman strode up to Tupper. “I must have the key,” he demanded.

“And you must get your breath out of my face,” Tupper snapped

back. He moved his attention to Brayker. “Tell me where it is, Brayker.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” he answered.

Tupper mashed his face to the table once more. “Speak, Brayker, or I’ll see you in prison for taking Jeryline hostage. It’s a very big crime nowadays, even out here in the sticks and boonies.”

Brayker struggled, but not much. “I don’t know,” he pushed out. “None of this.”

Tupper looked up. “Jeryline? You all right?”

She had been wandering around in small circles, and stopped now. “Huh?”

“Call Mavis Dornberry at headquarters in Junction City, could you? I want everything she can find on a—”

He raised Brayker erect again. “Got a first name? Middle initial?”

Brayker remained silent. The jaw muscles in his temples bulged in and out as he worked his teeth against each other. Tupper patted a hand against his back pockets, left, right, left. “Still no wallet. Just give Mavis the name Brayker, have her run it through. Odd enough name, she might find something. It’s B-R-A-Y-K-E-R.”

“No problem,” Jeryline said, and went to the desk.

The Salesman, who seemed perfectly happy not to have a name at all, took off his duster coat and stalked over to where Wally Enfield and Uncle Willie were sitting in front of the television, which was now persuading them to buy a new type of soap called Fresh Splash, not that they were interested in it at all. Wally was mesmerized by the police activity; Uncle Willie, perhaps remembering one or two of his dozens of run-ins with the local constabulary, was shrunken into the sofa à la Wally and was watching the commercial with all the intensity of a medical student witnessing his first brain surgery.

The Salesman tossed his coat across the empty sofa. “Idiots,” he muttered. When he turned Uncle Willie let his gaze creep up to watch him: something across the room had just caught the Salesman’s attention. The Salesman hurried over to where Tupper was allowing Brayker to sit at the table.

“Under there,” the Salesman announced, pointing. “I’ve figured it out by now.”

Tupper touched a finger to his forehead. “Say what?”

“There. A little ledge under the perimeter of the table. He hid the key there when we came in.”

“Zat so?” Tupper looked tired of the whole affair. “Give me a second.” He bent over and felt under the lower edge of the table, grunting against the pressure of his ample stomach as his belt cut into

it. His face turned a definite red.

"Whoa-oh," he blurted suddenly. "We've got something here."

Faintly, something clunked. Tupper backed up and rose to his feet. "Bingo," he wheezed, and held it up.

An ornamental key. Uncle Willie, looking at it, had one distinct thought: *Big fucking deal.* It was made out of some kind of pounded metal and looked to be worth about twenty-two cents at a recycling place, if you were lucky.

The guy they were calling Salesman clicked open his little leather case. "Sheriff," he said, "be so kind as to put it in here, would you?"

Tupper eyeballed the key, shook it in his hand while he recovered his breath. "There's some kind of glass ball toward the top," he said. "About half full of dark stuff." He swished it around, holding it to the light. "Looks like maple syrup."

Feet clopped on the stairs. "Didn't find nothing in Room Five," Martel blared, and grinned his famous monkey-grin. "Caught me a whore and her john in the act, though. It's a three-way bust tonight."

Behind him were Cordelia and Roach, their clothes ruffled and off-kilter, Roach's face smeary with red lipstick, his shoes untied. Cordelia's extensive makeup had been smeared around and she was barefoot. And as mad, Uncle Willie could see as he watched them descend, as a hornet stuck on hot flypaper.

"Sheriff Tupper," Cordelia brayed as she reached the landing, "I will not tolerate this kind of treatment from your deputy! You and I have known each other since the git-go. We have been more than friends on occasion. Kindly inform your storm trooper that we have an agreement!"

"Ah, jeez, Bob," Tupper groaned. "Leave these good folk alone."

The Salesman cleared his throat. "Sheriff, dump that crap out of the orb and put the key in this case, won't you now? And I'll be on my way."

Tupper glanced at him. "Orb? Oh yeah, you're a hotshot antique dealer from back east. And you'll be on your way, on foot in a thunderstorm, no car, no map or nothing to guide you back to New York or wherever the hell you came from. Mister, you are as strange a man as Brayker ever will be, and you are not going anywhere until this whole damned mess is figured out. Jeryline!"

She was gone. A length of curly telephone wire led from the front desk, over the top of the nearest door, and into the kitchen. She appeared and waved a hand meaning Hold your horses, Sheriff, I'll be done in a minute—at least to Uncle Willie's way of deciphering things.

Tupper cursed softly. "Deputy, take Mr. Brayker here out to the

car."

Martel moved to take control of Brayker, who began to twist and struggle as Tupper started to put the key in its case. "Don't do it!" he shouted. "You don't know what will happen, what's at stake!"

"He's simply insane," the Salesman said. "This is obviously the receptacle for the artifact, and I am obviously its owner."

Jeryline strode out of the kitchen with the phone in her hand. "Mavis has a line through to the crime-net computer, but the only Brayker they show was a petty thief who died four years ago."

Tupper scowled. "Wouldn't you know? Okay, Bob, get his ass to the car. As far as we know he has no priors, but attempted auto theft is a good start." He turned to the Salesman and extended the key. "Here it is."

"You can't give him that," Brayker howled. "He's not who he says he is!"

The Salesman had taken a step backward. "Well?" Tupper demanded. "You want it, or not?"

"Just place it in the case for me."

Tupper narrowed his eyes. "What, you can't touch it? Maybe you don't want your fingerprints on it?"

"That's absurd, Sheriff."

"Then take it. You can wipe the prints off later."

He hesitated.

"Jeryline," Tupper said, "keep Mavis on the line. Salesman, let's see some identification."

The Salesman looked from face to face, grinning limply. "Are you mad, Sheriff? You think that I'm—"

"I don't think nothing, yet," Tupper interrupted. "But if you think I'm mad now, just keep on stalling."

The Salesman's grin vanished. "Very well." He snapped the case shut and set it on the floor. "The time for stalling is over."

Jeryline was just lifting the phone to her ear again to tell Mavis to get ready for more info, when the Salesman straightened and his right fist shot out toward Tupper in an instantaneous, whipping blur. It was in that millisecond that Jeryline realized, with the speed of sudden, unvoiced recognition, that Brayker was indeed a part of her destiny, of the destinies of everyone present at the Mission Inn on this howling night. The Salesman's fist clove Tupper's face in half, passed on through his brain, and with a hideous squelching noise, exploded out of the back of his head. Blood and clots of matter sprayed in a sudden wash across Brayker and Deputy Martel. Cordelia and Irene both screamed in unison, as did Roach, whose tone added a horrible

contralto effect. Little Wally's mouth fell open and he fainted across Uncle Willie's lap. Uncle Willie himself had become a statue with a scraggly beard and huge, frozen eyes.

The phone dropped from Jeryline's suddenly nerveless fingers and clunked on the floor. The twitching body of Sheriff Tupper hung from the Salesman's arm. The Salesman tried to shake it free.

"Get me out of these cuffs!" Brayker shouted at Martel, but Martel was doing an Uncle Willie imitation without the beard. "Dammit!" Brayker howled. "Jeryline! Help me!"

She stared at him. Between her feet Mavis's voice on the phone was a tiny buzzing.

"Jeryline," Brayker shouted, his teeth clenched, his bloody face drawn up. "He'll kill all of us if you don't *move!"*

She blinked at him. Her mind could not unscramble the sounds he was making. The Salesman had Tupper's body on the floor now and had a foot on his shoulder, still trying to jerk his hand out of the mangle of meat and shards of bone that had been Tupper's head.

The antique key had fallen from Tupper's hand when he died and now Brayker stepped to it and kicked it under the table. Moving backward, he got to Martel and tried to open a pouch on his belt that looked likely to hold keys. Jeryline watched all this from the safety of her senseless, dreamy world.

"Goddamn you, Jeryline!" Brayker shrieked. "Move your big fat fucking *ass!"*

She jerked. Her ass was not big. She had been told by many a man that her ass was to die for, so gorgeous was it. She unlocked her body and skirted the desk. "You're a jerk," she snarled in Brayker's face, and dug Martel's official set of keys out of the pouch. She pawed through them, found the smallest one, and unlocked the cuffs. Brayker twisted out of them just as the Salesman's hand pulled free. The Salesman then swung his fist in a huge arc, catching Brayker only slightly as he ducked.

Martel finally came to life. With a hand shaking so hard he could barely unsnap his holster, he hauled his pistol out and stuck it toward the Salesman's chest. "You stop doing that stuff!" he hollered, barely able to hold onto the pistol. Jeryline was reminded of Barney Fife and his case of nerves.

Uncle Willie stood up suddenly. Wally Enfield thumped to the floor like a rubber dummy. "I've knowed me some judo," he shouted to the Salesman, and assumed an odd stance. "Take *me* on, Snakebite!"

The Salesman turned to look at him, laughing. Brayker coupled his hands together to form one huge fist and swung out hard, as if he held

an axe. When it connected, the Salesman's nose broke with a wet little snap, but he only turned again and smiled.

"At long last," he breathed, and clamped both hands around Brayker's neck. He lifted him an inch or two off the floor. "You've been lucky for too long," he sneered. "I hope you like what happens next."

Jeryline looked around for a club, an ashtray, any kind of weapon. There were chairs but they would splinter in a heartbeat. There were the curtain rods but they were flimsy aluminum.

"Remember Quebec?" the Salesman crowed. "Remember *Seattle?* Remember all the times you should have been *dead?"*

Jeryline spotted the oversized key. She dropped to her knees and crawled under Brayker while he shook and gobbled above her. It was heavy and cold. She staggered to her feet and swung it back like a knife, intending to stab it somewhere in the Salesman's face, maybe his eye.

"Goodbye," the Salesman said, and squeezed his hands tighter.

She drove the key toward his face with all her strength. An arm swung out and blocked the blow. She careened backward.

Brayker had done it. Though she had fallen on her butt, her arm was still a captive to his hand. His face had turned from blue into purple, and a thin line of blood slid from the corner of his mouth. His eyes, fixed on the key, were bulging so hard she thought they must pop out.

His hand slid down her arm to her hand. He jerked on the key, jerked again. Jeryline let him take it, stunned and bewildered.

"Fuck . . . you!" he gurgled, and mashed the key against the side of the Salesman's face.

The Salesman screamed. Long tendrils of steam hissed out from under the key. He dropped Brayker but the key was still welded to his face. He pranced and whooped, slapping at it as if it were a wasp that could sting and sting again. As Brayker wobbled to his feet, the Salesman peeled the key away. New steam and smoke burst from his fingertips as he did. The key clunked on the floor and lay there with strings of flesh boiling on its edges.

The Salesman staggered and reeled to the nearest window, both hands clutching the side of his face. With a clumsy backward leap he crashed through it. Cold wind and wet drizzle blew inside, billowing the curtains while shards of glass crashed on the floor.

Choking and retching, Brayker crawled on his hands and knees to where the key had fallen. When he had it in his hand, he rose to his knees and stuffed it back into the leather pouch that Sheriff Tupper

had belatedly found hidden under his clothes.

Uncle Willie, Irene, even Cordelia and tonight's lover Roach, slowly stepped to the window. On the floor, Wally uttered a groan that everyone ignored.

"Don't," Brayker gasped. "Not yet."

He clambered to his feet, one hand swiping away the blood from his mouth and chin. "It's not over," he said, his voice cracked and rasping. "It's never over."

Irene emitted a strange, strangled noise. "Look at what he's doing," she whispered. *"Look!"*

Jeryline stumbled past Brayker to get to the window. Irene's porchlight was only a $8.99 K-Mart special Jeryline had picked up in Avery, and then installed for the bitch, but the poor light its forty-watt bulb cast was enough. On the porch the Salesman was furiously stripping off his shirt, where blotches of his own melted skin were smoldering. Lightning flashed nearby and in the tick of time it took for the thunder to report in, Jeryline saw his face illuminated. It was twisted, somehow pointy, wicked, scarred badly by the application of the antique key. Had he been wearing a mask? she wondered. She remembered a movie they had shown in the women's prison about a year ago, a film where this guy could make artificial faces—she had liked it enough to write to her sister Joan in Albuquerque, asking that she send the book, if there was one. For a moment now her mind went gray: false faces, like in the book and movie? Or was this even more sinister than that?

The Salesman extended a hand, grinning horribly to his audience, which now included Brayker. A windowful of faces, Jeryline thought, and wondered how many of these faces would be left if the Salesman got back in. Nobody could hit like that; nobody could punch a fist through a living skull. Unless, maybe, they are wigged out on drugs and totally insane.

"Damn," Brayker whispered. "Just like before."

She was about to turn her head to comment on this, ask him when and where the hell the befores had happened, when the Salesman shouted: "It could have been easy, my good people. It could have been a simple matter of giving me that key." He let his gaze bounce from face to face in the window as if memorizing each one, finally settling on Brayker. "You must be so dreadfully tired after all these years, Brayker," he said. "So horribly, dreadfully sick of it all."

Brayker said nothing, but raised the pouch so that the Salesman could see it. "Not as long as I'm alive," he rapsed through the aching knot that was his throat. "It starts again tonight, and it will end like it always has."

The Salesman looked off to one side, shaking his head. “Sometimes even I grow weary of this,” he said.

Jeryline watched as he extended his other hand to the one he was holding to his side. A trace of light gleamed off his moving little finger, where a pointed fingernail that seemed as thick and yellow as a talon grew. With it he rasped the skin of his palm in the shape of a cross, and held it out for them to see. *“Behold!”* he hissed, and punctured his palm with the talon. A drop of dark blood peeked out. With a hard and purposeful swipe of his hand, he carved his entire palm open in a single deep line.

Bob Martel slumped backward against Jeryline. “So damn much blood,” he groaned. “The Sheriff, ah God, the Sheriff . . .”

His eyelids fluttered. Jeryline wormed herself to the side and let him thunk to the floor, her eyes still on the Salesman and his hand. He cupped his palm for a moment while blood formed a pool in it, watching it with an almost motherly expression of concern.

He snapped his head up and his crazy grin came back. Again lightning stroked the sky and cast harsh light over him. “Ask Brayker why you’re about to die,” he shouted over the following clap of thunder. “Ask Brayker!”

He swept his hand to the side and tipped out a small bit of his blood. It spattered on the gravel and was instantly washed under by the rain.

“Arise, friend,” he intoned as if in prayer.

At that spot in the gravel a strange lump bumped upward with a crunch. Wet rocks tumbled lazily from its peak. Jeryline barely had time to blink before the earth underneath the spot erupted into a geyser of dirt and mud. Some wet, syrupy thing burst up, hurling more dirt and a spray of mucus aside. In that wink of an eye, she saw arise, crouched and newborn and blinking stupidly in the rain, a guy in a cheap rubber monster suit.

What the hell? she wondered. *What the* . . .

Author's Interlude

by
T. C. Keeper

Was that cool, or what? Rubber monster suit! R-U-B-B-E-R monster suit! According to Lesson Two of the Famous Dead Writer's Course *it is important to keep the reader wondering what will happen next. I'll bet that* none *of you expected the Salesman's blood to bring guys in rubber monster suits out of the ground! Took you by surprise and made you want to read more, didn't I?*

Truth is, Jeryline only thinks *they are monster suits, because never in her life has she laid eyes on a real demon—but she won't be thinking it long! Demons come in many shapes and sizes, yet they all have one thing in common: they love humans. Love them. Rare, medium, or well done, that is.*

Since we're taking a break, why don't you go ahead and peek in the fridge for something to snack on, if you can eat after reading about Sheriff Tupper's latest headache, or go use the bathroom, if you haven't already soiled your undies. Myself, I'm taking my typewriter to the cemetery to work on the plot.

6

Brayker had seen it all before, too many times before, but the display of the Salesman's power always hit him like a fresh punch to the gut. There were four of the newborn creatures beginning to caper and prance out there now as the Salesman dropped new blood on the ground. Lighting cut the night, and rain slashed across the earth as if the black sky was aware of this new confrontation and was trying to drown it.

"Get back from the window," Brayker shouted, shoving people aside. He dug his hand into the pouch and jerked the key out. "Back, dammit," he commanded, pushing his way through. "Goddammit, Irene, move your green ass out of the way!"

Lightning flashed again: one of the creatures already had its rubbery claws on the open window frame. With a clumsy leap it sprang into the room, lurched in a half-circle with its yellow eyes bulging, and jumped at Deputy Martel. Martel coughed out a short scream as it latched itself to his clothing like a large toad and wrenched its mouth open. With an animal grunt it tried to take a bite of his face, but Martel jerked backward.

Brayker jammed the key into his pocket and darted to Sheriff Tupper's fallen body. He bent and jerked Tupper's pistol out of its holster, turned, and fired two quick shots.

The creature's eyes were the target. Parts of the back of its head blew outward in a spray of green and red liquid. With a high-pitched, pig-like squeal it dropped to the floor. Whitish fluid drizzled from its punctured eyeballs, causing shallow burns in the carpet where it dripped.

Irene suddenly let out a whoop. Brayker spun, raising the pistol again. Another creature had leapt through the open window and hooked itself to her. She batted at it with her open hands, spinning in circles, shrieking. Brayker hesitated, then fired twice. The creature thumped greasily to the floor with its eyes shot out, twitched once, and was still.

Someone began to giggle. Brayker snapped his head around. It was Jeryline. Her giggles became real laughter. She pressed both hands to the sides of her head, making her hair stand up in comical pony-tails, and lurched in a circle. "Don't you see?" she shouted. "Don't you *see?"*

The other five, and Brayker, eyed her. Wally Enfield, almost

awakened from his previous fainting spell, had fainted again.

"They're *costumes!"* she bellowed. "Fucking *costumes!"*

She walked to the creature that had attacked Irene. Smoke drifted up from the stained, burned carpet where its blood had hit. Jeryline dropped to her knees and, with a grunt, rolled the thing over. She began to poke her fingers at the nape of its rubbery neck.

"There's a *zipper* here someplace," she said. Her hair hung across her eyes in damp strings; her eyes themselves were overly bright. Brayker had seen this reaction before, and not just in women. Ignoring her, he jogged to the open window, pulling the key out of his pocket as he moved. He stopped and twisted the glass orb on its mounting, exposing a small hole. When he upended the key a single drop of the dark liquid fell on the window sill.

"Well, I'll be hanged," Uncle Willie breathed wonderingly.

The single drop had instantly begun to sizzle. Two horizontal lines of yellowish flame shot from it, spread to the sides and zipped upward as fast as a pair of slot cars on an easy track, then met again at the top. Poof, and the flame was out.

Brayker turned. "This window is sealed now. None of the demons, not even the Salesman, can pass through it."

Roach rattled his head as if clearing it of cobwebs. "Hold on here now," he said. "They ain't no such things as demons."

Brayker offered him a bitter sneer. "Are you going to look for zippers now too? Or just shut your eyes and pretend nothing happened?"

Cordelia put a hand against Roach's chest. "Listen to me," she said, her eyes moving back and forth from Brayker to Roach. "The Bible talks about demons all the time. Remember when Jesus commanded them to leave that man? He made the demons go into a herd of pigs."

Irene nodded. "Jesus believed in demons. Why can't we?"

Jeryline shot to her feet. "Listen to you people," she hissed, staring incredulously at the others. "There are no demons, and even if there was, they would be *spirits.* Jesus didn't have a bunch of guys in monster suits running all over the place, and that's what these are, nothing more. Here."

She strode to the desk, extracted a pencil from a jar of pens and pencils, went back, and squatted by the fallen creature. "The game's over," she blared in its face. "Hop up or get a pencil in the eye!"

Brayker hurried to the front door. He let a drop of liquid fall on the wooden threshold. Lines of yellow flame burst into existence, shot from angle to angle, and met at the top. *Poof!* and they were gone.

Jeryline lowered the tip of the pencil to the deflated hole where

once a huge yellow eye had been. “One, two, three,” she said almost gleefully. “One, two, three!”

Brayker went to another window, shook out a drop, stepped back.

“You faker!” Jeryline screamed. She stood and began to kick the corpse. “Get up! Get your fucking ass *up!”*

She slapped her hands to her face and began to weep. Uncle Willie went to her. She whirled and embraced him in a sudden, crushing bear hug. “It can’t be,” she moaned against his dirty jacket. The pencil dropped from her hand and clicked on the floor beside the creature—beside the *demon.* Uncle Willie looked down at it. He had seen ten thousand unbelievable things in his life and in his delirium tremens, but nothing to match this slimy, puckered, green dead thing, this demon.

“They’re always howling about how the world is gonna end soon,” he said as Jeryline sobbed, and stroked her hair. “Maybe there’s a God up there who’ll watch over us while it does.”

As far as comforting words go, he thought dismally, there had to better ones than those.

Brayker marched up. “This area is sealed for now. Jeryline, take me through the rest of the building, show me every possible entrance and exit.”

She pulled away from Willie and swiped both palms across her eyes. “Who are you?” she whispered. “Just who in the hell *are* you?”

He pointed a finger in her face. “To hell with who I am. You either live, or you die, tonight. All of us. It’s that simple.”

Roach, perhaps tired of Cordelia hanging on him again, shook her aside and piped up. “Mister,” he said, “you throw orders around like a goddamned general, but not any general *I’ve* ever heard tell of. Me, I’m heading out to my car and getting the holy fuck out of here. Anybody care to join?”

They looked back to Brayker, their eyes full of questions. Wally Enfield, a corpse by the TV, raised his head and moaned. He spied Tupper’s body and scrunched his eyes shut.

“Well,” Cordelia muttered, “we’ve already killed two of them, and there’s only four. If we all go charging out we might make it. But not in Roach’s little bug-mobile.”

“It’s a damned good car,” Roach snarled at her.

Irene, holding her heart, stepped forward. She fanned her face with her other hand. “My car is out back. ’Eighty-two Caprice. It seats eight. All we’ve got’s seven, but we’ll have to carry Wally if he doesn’t come back from the dead any faster. That could slow us down.”

“Forget it,” Brayker said.

Bob Martel, the front of his uniform smeared and slick with whatever goop the demon that attacked him had been shiny with, decided to find his voice. “Sheriff Tupper’s cruiser is out front, people. Half of us head for it, the other half heads out back for Irene’s wheels. We’re bound to make it, cause they’re outnumbered, and besides, I’ve still got my gun.”

“Forget it,” Brayker said again. “The Salesman can make them faster than you can kill them. We have to hole up.”

Roach stepped in front of Brayker, his chest pushed out and his chin stuck up high. “Yo, hotshot,” he said tauntingly, “if you’re so full of ideas, why don’t you give *us* an idea who that Salesman guy is? And like Jeryline there asked just now, without you bothering to answer, just who in the hell are *you?”*

Brayker looked from face to face, finding fear, of course, but more anger than anything else. Why, he wondered, was he surprised? People do not want to deal with unpleasantries. People do not want to deal with the unexpected. As long as people have enough to eat and enough to drink, they will be satisfied to ignore the ways of the world until it all comes crashing down around their well-fed, well-watered heads. Suddenly they look for a quick way out, and someone to blame for the interruption.

He shut his eyes for a fraction of a moment. Once upon a time he had been a child; once upon a time he had been a sturdy little boy full of innocence and smiles. He grew up in an era when the world went mad; if not for the war and what he discovered there, he would have lived a normal life.

Exhausted, he willed his eyes open. “I have no control over you,” he said. “All I can do is warn. If you go outside, you will die. It’s that simple.”

Roach emitted pig noises through his nose. “As if that answers the question, Brayker. We want to know—we *all* want to know—just who you are.” He jerked out an arm to indicate the outside world. “And who that freaky guy is, and how the both of you wound up here.” He looked at the others. “Right? Don’t we all want to know?”

Brayker eyed them. No one was in unison here. It was a flock of malcontents looking for an exit from an unpopular place. He went silently to where his butterfly knife had fallen near the dining table, folded it together, and shoved it into his pocket. It was an old knife and a trusty one, and had saved his hide more than once. None of these people seemed likely to do him a similar favor. “I’m not explaining to you, or anybody else,” he said finally. “Go ahead and do what you’ve got to do. Just leave me out of it.”

The man they had called Wally was trying to get to his feet, his

scrawny legs wobbling and disjointed inside his slacks. He looked at the two dead creatures on the floor and clapped both hands over his mouth.

"You there, weenie-butt," Roach called out. "You follow the deputy out to his car. Cordelia, you and the old wino here hightail it out with them. Me and Jeryline and Irene will cut through the back to her Caprice."

Cordelia put on a mighty frown. "Roachie, aren't me and you together tonight? Aren't we? Let me go with you."

"Fine," he said, waving her away with one hand. "It don't matter anyway. Half of us goes out the front, and the other half out the back. Brayker!"

Brayker shifted his gaze from a window over to Roach.

"Gimme that gun. We're gonna have to shoot our way out, most likely."

Brayker's eyes narrowed. "You don't have a chance, kid. None of you do."

"Kid?" Roach spat on the floor and hitched his belt up higher. "I'm in the National Guard, Brayker. I'm a goddamn Specialist E-4 in the National Guard."

"Wonderful," Brayker grunted. "You have extensive combat experience."

"Been trained for it, at least. And you ain't nothing but a street bum anyhow, by the looks of you."

"Sticks and stones," Brayker said tiredly. "And you're not getting my gun."

" 'Fraid to be without it?" Roach goaded. "Chicken-shit, maybe?"

"Extremely."

"Then screw you, nutless. Hey, pretty girl!"

Jeryline looked around, then locked eyes with him, her face dull, her mouth hanging slack. She licked her teeth. "What?"

"You and me and Cordelia and Irene, we're going out the back. Is there any steps back there, a porch or something? We could fall off, and none of us want to be late supper for them rubber monkeys."

"Three steps," she said. "Concrete. No porch."

"Okay." He propped his hands on his hips and surveyed his army. "Deputy, gather your crew by the door. Cordelia and Jeryline, come with me. Irene, get your keys out and ready. We're gonna be out of here and in them cars in three seconds flat, I'm betting. Brayker? Last chance?"

Brayker dragged a hand down his dirty, haggard face. With a

sudden motion he sailed Tupper's old Colt police special across the room into Roach's hands. "Shoot for their eyes," he said. "Nowhere else will do."

Now Roach grinned. "You sit tight, and I'll have a whole cavalry here in half an hour. Wino, you go help the weenie-butt get his scrawny ass outside."

Uncle Willie, muttering indecipherable things, went to aid Wally in his quest to get up off the floor. "Don't be barfing on me," he warned as he slid an arm under Wally's shoulders to support him. "And don't be screaming in my ear or nothing if them demons get close."

Wally, pale as a bar of Ivory soap, nodded acceptance of the terms.

Roach blew out a long preparatory breath. "Okay. Take your positions."

Deputy Martel, Uncle Willie, and Wally Enfield shuffled to the front entrance. Martel drew his pistol, flipped the cylinder open, checked it, clicked it back into place. "Six rounds of 132-grain wadcutter," he told Willie. "Drop a giant in his tracks, drop him like a rock."

"Don't be telling me there's giant ones out there too," Willie said with a voice that shook.

Roach herded Cordelia, Irene, and Jeryline past the desk and into the kitchen. "On my signal!" he hollered unexpectedly, making Jeryline jump. "Got that, deputy?"

No reply drifted in, just a grumbling set of noises made, Jeryline assumed, by a deputy getting tired of taking orders from a part-time fry-cook and dishwasher.

The fry cook, still disheveled from his interrupted liaison with Cordelia and still with his tennis shoes untied, pressed himself to the wall by the door. In his greasy white T-shirt, with his shapeless brown hair pasted to his head with sweat, Jeryline could not find much confidence in his soldiering expertise. It occurred to her that in the National Guard, he might be a Specialist E-4, but was probably a cook. "You three run out first," he panted. "I'll cover you to the car."

Cordelia, still barefoot, with her makeup smeary and comical, latched onto his arm. "I'll wait and run with you," she said. "I know you won't let them get me."

He eyed her. "Sure. Irene, you and Jeryline run out there as fast as you can, and get the car going. Pull up as close as you can and open the doors when you see us head out. Understand?"

"It's a plan," Irene said. She pushed the long sleeves of her green pantsuit up to her biceps, and flexed her hands. "I'm tougher than I look, believe it or not. The body's sagging but the frame ain't bent. So are you ready, Jeryline? Ready?"

Jeryline felt wobbly and sick, and the inner screen of her mind kept presenting her with color slides of the dead and mangled things, the sheriff, the monsters, the demons, the unbelievable. She had lived through months of hell in prison, had been put into solitary time and again for fighting with inmates, fighting with guards. If it were a gang of killer bikers out there now, she could deal with it. But not with a pack of guys in cheap rubber . . .

. . . *monster suits?*

Again she felt the need to howl with laughter. It was too bizarre, it had never been posted to the roster of her life that on this night she must run through the rain and the wind to escape a pack of guys in . . .

. . . guys in . . .

Screw it. She clamped a hand over her eyes. The world was more fucked up than she ever would have believed. She had been used and abused but had never faced the idea of being killed, perhaps killed and eaten, by a pack of demons wearing demon suits. No zippers, even. Real horrors from the top of their misshapen heads to the bottoms of their misshapen feet.

Irene put her hand around the knob, tested it slowly to make sure it wasn't locked, and looked into Jeryline's eyes. "On three," she said breathlessly, and offered a wink. "One, two—"

Something heavy and hard crunched against the door, nearly splitting it in half down the center. A webbed, pebbly hand squeezed through the open slot between the door and its casing, flexing, clawing, embedding gouges into the old brown paint.

Roach grunted with surprise. He shifted the pistol in his hand and began to hammer the butt of it on those questing fingers, where two-inch nails the color of butterscotch clicked and scraped.

The door was slammed from outside again. Irene leaned into it, grabbing Jeryline by the hair and hauling her into the act. "I need your weight," she shouted. "Push against me!"

The broken door groaned against its hinges. Cordelia got the idea and dropped to the floor between Jeryline's legs. She scrambled to press her weight against the bottom part of the door, her bare feet squeaking on the linoleum tiles.

"It's—no—*good!"* Irene groaned. "We're losing it!"

Roach dropped back and held the pistol in a two-handed cop stance. "Let it blow," he barked. "I got 'em!"

As it turned out, no one needed to let it go: in the next assault the door snapped apart in a spray of wood chips and paint. Jeryline squealed as she was sent spinning across the black-and-white

checkered tiles on her fanny. She slammed against a plastic trash barrel, crushed it against the south wall, and ricocheted across the room to come to an ignoble stop under the aluminum prep table, where just a few hours ago she had quartered the potatoes for dinner. That, of course, was before Brayker entered her life. She wished desperately that he had stayed away forever.

She crawled from under the table and pushed herself to her feet. Her hair was in her eyes again and she swatted it aside. Roach and Irene had become very popular with the rubber-suit crowd, she observed, and Cordelia had come across a rolling pin, which she was using as a club against the bumpy head of the gargoyle trying to drag Roach outside. Roach himself was squalling like a pig, hanging onto nearby objects and kicking at that distorted animal head, at those bulbous yellow eyes. It did not seem to matter to the stuntman inside the rubber suit; he was a fellow dedicated to his craft.

Jeryline turned in a clumsy circle. Irene was a cheapskate when it came to owning the Mission Inn, but she did have a set of very good cooking knives sticking through a slotted block of wood that was screwed to the wall by the prep table. Jeryline lunged for them, came up short, and banged her forehead against the table's rounded edge. She saw brief stars, a few comets. Then she was up again, clawing for the knives, hauling a big one from the wooden holder so fast it made a whirring sound as it sliced the air.

She spun around. Cordelia was doing her best with the rolling pin, but it was like fending off wild boars with a flyswatter. Roach grunted and squealed as he was jerked farther through the smashed door. The pistol Brayker had taken from Sheriff Tupper's body was still in Roach's hand but he was ignoring it, had apparently forgotten he had it at all. Jeryline charged at the nearest stuntman, one who was in a finely crafted monster suit that made him look like a green and red frog with a rooster's comb flapping on top. He was bent over Irene, pawing through her hair. Jeryline raised the knife over her head, hesitated there while a drop of sweat rolled off her nose, then grunted and stabbed the knife deep into the stuntman's back.

She fell away, her breath screeching up and down in her throat, her eyes as big as silver dollars. The knife was a prop, was only a prop in this movie: she had buried it to the hilt in the middle of the stuntman's back, yet all he did was straighten up angrily, eye her with his costume's huge yellow eyes blazing and hateful, then leap at her, still quite alive. She was smashed to the floor on her back and felt long hot teeth snap at the meat of her throat.

She screamed. The time for the director of this movie to shout *Cut!* was long overdue; the stunt people in the gruesome duds had gone

insane and taken over the entire production. She pushed her hands against the demon's slick green chest, levered it upward a bit, and found it amazingly heavy, as if it were full of water. Its drooling jaws clamped open and shut with the furious speed of a ferret attacking a snake, spittle flipping from its elongated teeth in a spray of yellowish foam. The creature smelled like sulfur, like freshly peeled boiled eggs.

Jeryline's arms weakened, wobbled, failed. The demon seemed to grin a rubbery, lipless *Thank you* as it crushed down on her again. It wrenched its jaws open. She turned her head and groaned, batting weakly at its face with her fists.

It squealed suddenly and its weight was gone from her. She looked up: the thing now had something strange sticking out of one lidless eye. It hopped and bellowed, pawing at it, knocking it aside finally. Jeryline rolled to her hands and knees and saw that Brayker's butterfly knife was on the floor, its shiny blade dull with something like foamy yellow mustard. Stuntman eye-juice, she decided crazily, and grabbed for it, able to see Brayker running toward her after having thrown it. Clawing in agony, the demon managed to knock the knife across the floor. Jeryline let out another groan, then brightened. By rising to her knees she was able to reach across the creature's back and work the kitchen knife free from its bony moorings there.

"In the eyes!" Brayker shouted. "You have to get them in the eyes!"

Green fluid was on this knife, your standard monster-blood. As she swung out with it she did not care if the stuff was camel snot or Cordelia's X-rated guacamole dip that had turned her bedsheets so green. The knife punctured the demon's remaining eye with a syrupy pop. White fluid squirted out to boil holes into the linoleum of Irene's kitchen, and several more on the front of Jeryline's canvas apron. With a squeal of disgust she jumped to her feet, untied it, and ripped it away. The demon went into a mindless, shrieking spasm of sorts a few seconds before it relaxed.

The gun in Roach's hand popped off a single random shot; Jeryline saw a burst of porcelain chips explode from the kitchen sink. Brayker dived for Roach, who was whooping and howling as he departed. Brayker wrested the pistol from Roach's hand and shot the eyes out of the two demons dragging him outside. Cordelia, currently going apeshit with the rolling pin, stepped aside long enough for Brayker to kill the last one.

Brayker kicked Roach away from the shattered door, then took out the key and worked the glass bulb open. He shook it at the ruined doorway. Lines of sparkling fire sketched a quick outline, then were gone.

He turned. "Now do you see?" he shouted. *"Now do you see!"*

Something wet and gray shot out of the dark behind Brayker. Jeryline uttered a short screech and dropped into a crouch with her arms protecting her head, sure now that this invasion would never end. The creature sailed through the shattered doorway, its claws outstretched, its tail arched and its eyes glowing and insane; it crossed the boundary between inside and outside and burst into a quick, blinding flash of white flame. When it hit the kitchen floor and slid against the wall it was little more than a husk, a drift of oddly shaped ashes.

After a wondering moment, Jeryline rose up again. “That—that liquid stuff. What is it?”

Brayker armed sweat off his face and dug the leather pouch out of his clothes. He shoved the key inside. “Weird science,” he said, approaching her. “What we have to do now is seal everything in this building. All of it. Come on.”

He took hold of her arm. She allowed herself to be carted a few steps, then jerked away. “No,” she said, backing away from him. Although this kitchen had been part of her life for many months it seemed alien and dangerous now, a new prison with new terrors, new inmates, a new breed of guard. “No way, Brayker. I am not part of this scene, I do not have anything to do with you, you can go fight your rubber monkeys without me around.”

“Oh, so you’re leaving us,” he said tonelessly. “Maybe going to go out the front door instead of the back? Do you suppose the others did any better than you? Do you suppose the deputy and old Willie and the scrawny guy are snug and safe in that cop car out front?”

“I don’t even care,” she shouted at him, wild with justifiable hate for the crazy man who had brought all this craziness to Wormwood, a town which Jeryline was beginning to hate more and more as these minutes dragged on.

Roach and Cordelia limped over, supporting each other like wounded comrades. Roach had some nasty scratches on his face and arms that were starting to puff up like hives; Cordelia’s hairdo had become an explosion of terrible proportions. Irene puffed her way to the huddle, shaking and waxen but looking very determined.

“They are not taking my house away from me,” she said, smoothing her green pantsuit where it could be smoothed. “I have invested my entire future to making this place work, and if Jesus could cast out demons, so might I thusly be able.” She frowned. “Jeez, do I sound biblical, or what?”

Brayker seemed to want to smile, then recaptured his stern face and stalked away. Jeryline offered him a mental *adios.*

“We can see if the other guys made it,” Roach wheezed. He dabbed

at a cut on the side of his neck. "Let's go out front."

Jeryline followed behind the trio, wanting in fact to locate a bottle of premium fire-water, lock herself in one of the bathrooms, and drink her way from now to dawn and the end of this unwanted chapter of her life.

If it really *did* end at dawn. Brayker had said something about surviving this night, and all would be okay in the morning. But who the hell was he to know?

Roach went to the window beside the television, where Dr. Richard Kimball was soundlessly endearing himself to this week's batch of disturbed yokels. "Can't hardly see squat," Roach said after cupping his hands around his eyes and pressing them to the window. "Which car was they gonna be taking?"

"Supposed to be that asshole deputy's squad car," Cordelia murmured. "Is it still out there?" She turned and looked over to where Tupper lay on the floor with a broad halo of blood circling his head. "Poor Parnell. And he was a family man, has a little kid."

Roach crouched and shifted as if scanning the Atlantic through a periscope, his breath fogging the glass. "Looks okay," he said after a second. "Let's make a dash to my Bug, peel outta here, forget Brayker and his giant key full of blood."

Jeryline perked up. "Blood?"

Roach swiveled his head. "Fucking-A, Jeryline. That glass ball's got blood in it that's all old and clotty. Ain't you never seen real old blood? Never slept on a broken nose?" He frowned stupidly. "Nah, I guess you wouldn't have. Anyway, let's roll on outta here."

He erected himself and once again surveyed his troops. Jeryline wanted, suddenly and quite desperately, to laugh in his face, maybe scream in his face, maybe cry in his arms. Instead she jammed her hands deep into the pockets of her jeans and decided to fade into the woodwork somewhere, invisible to the demons, invisible to the people, invisible to the world.

Roach, Cordelia, and Irene, hushed and intent, shuffled to the front door. Roach pressed his ear to the heavily painted wood. His eyebrows moved and twitched, reminding Jeryline of those hairy little caterpillars with eight-hundred legs or so.

"Clear," Roach pronounced, straightening. "Time to boogie."

He fanned the door open. The weather said hello, flapping their clothes, drenching them in mist and errant rain. All three peered into it.

"Now!" Roach bellowed, and they charged out.

It took only a second for the screaming to start.

7

The man named Brayker walked up the steps alone.

He was an ordinary guy who looked to be about thirty, maybe younger. His hair, which had been golden brown when he was small, had turned black over the years, had developed a bit of a curl to it. His eyes were light green, but were usually clouded by sleeplessness; most of the time the whites of those eyes were threaded with bright little twigs of red. He had scars on him, though a great deal of them were not visible on the outside. He did not mean to be a jerk, yet that is what people usually assumed he was; he was not a pushy person yet that is the impression he usually gave. His greatest desire was, like the desire of many other people, just to be left alone to live his life on his own terms.

All of that had changed forever in a time so far away that even the newest of the newborn babies then were now either dead or doddering around in nursing homes all old and gray and forgetful. There was a war, and war brings madness; he was a soldier, and soldiers bring death. That war was assigned to the trashpile of public memory when Brayker was still young and freshly out of it; that war was now an unimportant detail in the history books of man. But not for the history books of Silas Brayker, the son of Madeline and Cuthbert Adams Brayker, born in a time when horses provided horsepower and electric lights were the playthings of the rich.

He walked up the steps alone, thinking of these things without wanting to, tired to the point of collapse. The newest cat-and-mouse game with the Salesman had started well over eight days ago in New York, where Brayker had lived in a small Greenwich Village flat on Bleeker Street and worked two jobs to keep from starving or being rained on to death from lack of roof. The Salesman had come to where Brayker worked the night shift, posed as an FBI agent to the shift boss, gotten Brayker hauled into the front office for a quick questioning session, and tried to handcuff him on the spot. Brayker had jumped the shift foreman to get his keys, and escaped into the employee parking lot. The shift boss had a brand new Firebird convertible that had to cost thirty grand if it cost a dollar. And now the car was, of course, a pile of recycling material on New Mexico Highway 47 just outside of Wormwood.

Brayker got to the stairway landing and walked to the right on the

thin green carpet, assuming that this had to be Irene's favorite color. The first door on the left sported tin letters that identified it as Number Two. Brayker leaned against the doorframe and dug out the ancient key from its pouch, clutched it firmly in his hand, tested the knob with his other hand, and pushed the door open in a swift move.

Dark inside. Lightning flickered through the jewels of raindrops affixed to the window. Brayker padded in and anointed the casing with a drop of blood from the key, watched the familiar zip-flash of the seal, glanced around again, and went out.

The rooms on the left were Two and Four and Six; the right-hand side offered One and Three and Five. Number Four smelled odd; at first Brayker froze up, acquainting himself with the odor before moving again: whoever lived here liked to burn incense, he decided. Maybe Jeryline. Harmless enough, though. He let a drop from the orb fall onto the window sill, then backtracked and flipped on the light. Her room was immaculately clean and well-ordered. All four walls were thick with posters of a city he recognized as Paris, as well as other European cities. Brayker shook his head. Wormwood, New Mexico was about as far away from the Continent as you could get. Apparently she had dreams of traveling to exotic places when she was off parole.

He went out and closed the door. Number Six had to belong to that little Wally guy, Brayker assumed. In the ghostly light, he could see that the walls were hung with post office memorabilia: a poster of the official USPS eagle printed on slick paper, more posters showing various collector's stamps now available, and at the foot of the bed, samples of variously sized mailing bags and boxes stapled to the walls along with official tags of their prices. Brayker gave a mental shrug—to each his own, eh?—and sealed the window.

Room Five was the one Irene had assigned to him, though he knew now that he would never sleep in it. He tarried at the window for a bit, looking out at the sodden world. There were roads out there that would take a man anyplace he chose to go; there were jobs to be gotten, apartments to be rented, ten thousand different places to hide for a while. But only a while. In time the Salesman would burst back into his life and send him hightailing it down the road again, Brayker the eternal stranger in another strange town.

He moved on. Cordelia's room was in shambles; Brayker decided that Roach was into a lot of romp-and-stomp lovemaking. The smell of sweat was still strong here: Roach was a hard worker, too. Brayker sealed the window, trying to remember the last time he had been with a woman in the same bed. Years? Decades? Never?

Such things were trivial, anyway. He never stayed in one place long

enough to make friends of any kind, and even if he did, the Salesman would make sure that everyone he cared for died in some new and inventive fashion. Life on the run was a lonely life, but the only life he knew.

As he was sealing each separate doorway, he heard shouting going on outside the house. With an internal sigh he hurried down the stairs, taking them three at a time. At the landing he could see that the front door was open, that the noise was just beyond it. He had the key still in his hand; a quick check showed that there was still enough blood inside the orb to do quite a bit of damage.

At the open door he looked outside. Roach was involved in a wrestling match with one of the Salesman's uglier associates, this one lumped and warty with a face full of tendrils like a catfish. Cordelia still had her rolling pin and was attempting to clobber the thing into the ground while Irene, a few steps away in the parking area, pounded the windows of Roach's VW bug with her fists. Apparently Roach had locked it up when he got here, which he inconveniently forgot. Of the three men from the second team, not one was around. Killed and dragged away? Very likely.

"Get him offa me!" Roach shrieked. "Cordy! Hit him in the eyes!"

Cordelia shifted, and swung the rolling pin like a bat, her face shiny in the rain, her hair drooping in miscolored strings. This swing sent the rolling pin's unused handle across the demon's right eye, tearing it open. White stuff belched out; Cordelia skittered backwards to avoid it.

The distraction gave Roach enough time to twist away from the creature's grip. He stumbled directly into Cordelia's arms. "Keep it away from me!" he shouted, panting like an overworked jogger as he turned her in a half-circle and dropped to his knees behind her. "Cordy, save me!"

She bent, took his head in her hands, and pressed her lips to his. The demon, now short one eyeball, shambled over and spread its arms, ready to capture them both.

"Behind you!" Brayker shouted.

Roach shot to his feet. His eyes were huge, his lips twisted in a leer of terror. As Brayker watched, he shoved Cordelia against the demon and scurried away, slipping and skating on the short stretch of grass between the parking lot and the Mission Inn's front steps.

"Give me the gun!" Brayker barked at him.

Roach staggered past him. "In the grass someplace. Someplace in the grass. Someplace. Someplace . . ."

He vanished inside. Now Cordelia screamed; Brayker spun to look.

The demon with the catfish face and one missing eye returned the look as he held her. All the hate in the world was inside its tiny mind; all the evil things, Brayker supposed, that lurked in the minds of everyone, held in check only by morality and law.

He shifted the key in his hand as Cordelia let out another whoop. At that instant Wally Enfield, apparently fully revived from his fainting spell charged out of the darkness. Brayker's jaw dropped; little wet Wally had the deputy's pistol in his hand. As Wally neared he fired a shot that chopped out a deep gouge in the demon's head, earning Brayker's admiration but not doing much to the victim.

"Go for his eyes," Brayker shouted.

Wally skidded on the grass, fell hard on his elbows, rolled once, and rose up with grass and dirt stuck all over his clothes. "I'll save you!" he cried, and raised the pistol.

Brayker foresaw a messy death for Cordelia. The gun boomed. The demon was flung backward, pierced expertly through the eye. Thin whipped cream squirted out of its eye and some of it splattered against Wally's chest. The demon crashed against the side of the building and fell over sideways in the weeds; Wally keeled over like a plank and lay smoking.

Cordelia staggered over to where he lay, gasping and blowing. "Oh, Wally," she groaned. "You saved me, and now look at you!"

He raised his head and uttered a short, warbling scream. Cordelia got her hands under his arms and hoisted him up. Irene gave up on the locked VW and darted over. They began to drag him to the house, wailing and sobbing.

Brayker put the key away and trotted down the steps to help them. Wally Enfield was not dead; Brayker had tasted the sting of that poison before and survived. As he and the two women were working him up the cement stairs, the Salesman stepped out of the dark.

"Anything I can do to help?" he said, and smiled.

Brayker and Cordelia and Irene switched into high gear. Wally got thrown into the Mission Inn and the three were inside a second later.

"Give me the key," the Salesman said very nicely as Brayker turned to slam the door. "Please." He was dressed now in a rain suit of some kind. He climbed the steps but stopped there, glancing at the frame where recent lines of fire had created thin burned lines. "It's hopeless this time," he said to Brayker. He stepped closer: they were nearly nose to nose. "I'll find a way in, you know. You *know* I'll find a way in. And then you will surrender the key to me, and go on with your life."

Brayker eyed him. Everyone was soaking wet and muddy but no,

not the Salesman. He looked, as usual, like a million bucks, give or take. “Let’s do it like this,” Brayker panted. “You come through the doorway here, and I give you the key.” He raised it up. Lightning winked on its silver rivets as a distant branch of yellow fire touched the desert floor. “In other words, Salesman, walk this way.” He performed an exaggerated goose step, then whirled and slammed the door in the Salesman’s face.

When he turned, Cordelia and Irene were kneeling on the floor pulling Wally’s shirt off. Blotches of seared red skin peeled off with it, and a trace of smoke. “My poor brave Wally,” Cordelia lamented. “He saved my life and now look at him.”

His eyes fluttered open. “Mommy?” he squeaked.

Cordelia took his head in her hands. “Mommy’s here, sweetheart. You just rest.”

Wally passed out again, this time with the hint of a smile on his pinched little face. Brayker detoured past them and into the kitchen, looking for Jeryline. No sign of her. As he pushed back through the swinging door, deputy Martel and Uncle Willie shot through the smashed outer door and immediately tripped over the handful of dead things splayed the floor. “My gun!” Martel squalled, shoving one of the corpses away with both feet before he stood. “That little shit stole my gun! Almost got us kilt!”

Uncle Willie planted his feet and wobbled upright. “They’s thick out there,” he panted. His breath in Brayker’s face was abominable. “Thicker’n molasses dumped on the shady side of an iceberg. We ain’t got a chance of surviving the night.”

Martel slapped his empty holster. Brayker had seen the effect before; if you hang around the Salesman long enough, you tend to get foggy and dazed. That was another of his weapons. Full-blown mind control was an even better one, but it took more time. “Did you see Jeryline out there?” Brayker asked them. Both shrugged and shook their heads, looked at each other, shrugged again.

“I’ll find her,” Brayker said. “But I want you to understand now that there is no way at all to get out of this motel. Not until dawn.”

Willie looked over Brayker’s shoulder to eye the swinging door. “I’m thinking that you’re right about that,” he murmured, “but don’t be calling this place a motel, not where Irene might hear you. This used to be a church, and now it’s an inn, but it ain’t *never* been a motel . . . if you value your hide, that is.”

“Noted,” Brayker said, trying to peer into the darkness and rain beyond the shattered door. “I just wonder if she’s gone outside.”

“Not Irene,” Willie said. “She’ll stay inside and fight for this place. I’ve seen her toss out men twice her size, three times her size. She

loves this place too much."

Brayker nodded, but he had not meant Irene. Would Jeryline have tried to escape? Or was she the type to hole up in a closet or attic?

He didn't think so. "We need to regroup," he said to the deputy. "We need to stay together, sit tight, wait for dawn."

Martel nodded. A sudden scream from the center of the inn, muffled through the wall, froze them for a moment, then sent them into a scramble. As he burst into the parlor area, Brayker took in the sight of Cordelia, hopelessly beyond middle age and jaded by life, beating the living shit out of young Roach. This time she had no rolling pin; this time she had selected a vase.

"Coward!" she was howling as she dogged him. "Left me out there alone!"

The vase had remarkable cohesive powers: though she was chasing him around the room and cracking him repeatedly over the head, the glazed porcelain refused to shatter. "Pushed me right into the arms of a monster! And Wally! Little Wally! Saved my ass while you slithered away on your belly like a snake!"

"Cordy!" Roach was braying as he scuttered here and there with his hands protecting his head. "I had to run! I went in to find the gun!"

"The fucking gun was still outside where you dropped it while you were shitting in your pants!"

She clopped him a good one. "How was I supposed to know?" he bawled, tripping over Sheriff Tupper's cooling carcass and falling to his hands and knees. He rolled onto his back to face her. "I'm no good in emergencies!"

"You ain't no good in *shit!"* she roared, and raised the vase. Roach crossed his arms over his eyes as it descended with all the speed of a meteor.

"Noooooooo!" he screamed, but it was too late. The vase finally blew apart as it smashed across his head, a geyser of shards and dust and a handful of pennies someone had hidden inside perhaps twenty years ago. Cordelia jerked away from the mess and marched primly over to where Wally Enfield lay.

"Now I know who my real friends are," she crooned as she knelt and lifted his head. She turned to Brayker. "Will he be dead soon?" He saw a genuine pair of tears in her eyes. "Did he die for me?"

"Doubt it," Brayker answered. "It's sort of like having a car battery explode while you're jumping it. No worse than that."

"Explode?" Cordelia whispered in a tone that indicated sudden respect for batteries. "Like bombs?"

Brayker took a breath to reply, but Wally came back to life and sat

up on the floor with a quick jerk. “I’ll save you!” he bellowed. “Cordelia! I’ll save you!”

She threw her arms around his head and smothered his face between her flabby breasts. His hair stuck up between them like bent wires. “My redeemer,” she crooned. “And Roach is history now.”

Brayker turned away. The whole entire bunch of funny-farm candidates was accounted for now, except Jeryline. He trotted to the stairway and had a foot on the second step when it occurred to him—why should he give a shit? Why should he work at protecting the lives of these small-town fools when in the end, as always, they would blame him for their misery and send him packing? Once in 1922, in a small town in Indiana—it had some kind of beyond-the-border name like Peru or Cairo or Brazil—he had come near to being lynched, had his hands tied behind his back, and was carried atop a galloping mob to a tree that had not seen a hanging in sixty years, or so the town constable had told him. This was the same constable who put the noose around Brayker’s neck and asked if it was comfy enough. How the man had laughed. How they all had laughed in their ignorance. Brayker had saved their hides, and all they had done to repay him was try to kill him. If not for the fact that he had hidden the key where it would not be found for centuries, perhaps thousands of years, the Salesman would not have plunged into the crowd playing the part of a traveling minister full of righteous fervor, and stopped the lynching like he did. And once again, even at such a young age, war veteran Silas Brayker set out on the road again, key in pouch, heart in throat, destination far away and unknown.

He stepped dispiritedly down from the stairway. This was no new and exciting adventure for him. His beginning days with the key, when he had felt heroic and special, were as dead and dry now as the dust under the pyramids. He was old and tired, he owed nothing to anyone, he had labored and suffered, and the time had come to die. Just to die.

He pressed his hands to his face. Underneath the familiar skin was the skull that had been his since birth, one of the only things on earth he could rightly claim as his own. He outlined his eyes with his fingers, feeling the bony circles there, knowing that in death these empty sockets would last for centuries, perhaps millennia, perhaps be dug up by an archaeologist and declared to be the skull of the missing link between man and apes, found at last in the age of the Jetsons.

To the left of the stairway, past the side of the television, was a small door. Brayker went to it, hoping in a dull way that it was a closet where he could hide himself, sink to his haunches, rest his head on his hands and weep for the life that had been taken from him in

1917. And now it was 1994, or 1995, maybe even 1996—why should he wonder? He would never die a natural death. People tended to worry about cancer, heart disease, strokes, old age—he was not susceptible to any of these. There was only one way he could die—by being killed: lynching, falling off a building, electrocution, a bullet between the eyes, sword through the heart, smoke inhalation, etc., etc., etc. Brayker knew for a fact that he would never die of old age. If it were not so, he would be dead already.

He tested the knob, then pulled open the mystery door. Dusty jars of preserves sat in silent and soldierly rows, peaches, tomatoes, green beans, pears, apple slices, pickles, brown things that might be plums, two jars of stuff that looked like sauerkraut, all of them a testament to summers long gone. Brayker surveyed them, leaning against the hard edge of the door, his face drawn and weary, his eyes clouded with thoughts. Had the ones who'd gone before him suffered this much? Had they forsaken family and friends and love, in exchange for a life one step ahead of disaster, of death? The key could be dated back to Biblical times: this much he knew. Of the rest he knew little, so little as to amount to nothing.

He pushed the door closed, and turned. This former church seemed to have been built a little askew, judging by the slant of the shadows. There was a wayward leaning in the walls here and there, the ceilings seemed not quite horizontal, the whole place gave the appearance of being constructed by well-meaning amateurs. Probably avid churchgoers with more heart than expertise, but the effect was not ugly. Brayker did not know why Wormwood had died. He only knew that he was here, that he could not escape until daylight graced the earth again, and that the people holed up with him would most likely be dead by dawn if he did not rein them in and keep them under his command. It was a job he hated, but one that he had learned to do through years of trial and error.

He knew he must find Jeryline. If she had made it safely off the premises to the empty town or the mudfields beyond the inn, she would be followed, if not on foot, then by air. When the Salesman declared war on Brayker it was always a declaration that spared no one around him. Winston Churchill had once told the English that there was nothing to fear but fear itself, but thousands of people killed in the air raids were testimony to the lie of it all. Brayker could not promise these people that they would survive, for this battle was something far larger than they could ever understand.

So screw it. He could send everyone out the front as a diversion, and escape out the back. Hop into a likely car, hot-wire it and peel out, goodbye and *adios, hasta la vista* baby, splitsville. Would it work? He had tried it before; there was no feeling quite like driving 120 mph

in a stolen car and having the Salesman calmly rise up in the rearview mirror to tap you on the shoulder and say boo. He was slick, he was crafty, he was powerful. But Brayker was a little slicker, a little craftier. Powerful not at all, except for what the blood of the key gave him, and that was old and clotted and running out.

He walked back into the light and assessed his chances of making it through the night, everyone's chances of making it. Cordelia and her new boyfriend Wally Enfield were sitting against the wall holding hands and chatting, Wally as beet-red as a beet can get under all that new attention. Roach had wandered away to lick his wounds; Uncle Willie had his little bottle of whiskey out and was draining the last drops into his mouth. Irene was in the shadows behind the front desk scratching her head with a pencil; what she had in mind Brayker could not know. Deputy Martel was missing, at least from this area. It occurred to him that Martel and Jeryline might be together, trying to escape again, running hand-in-hand across a dark field of weeds with mud glopping under their shoes and a new romance rising in their hearts. The thought disturbed him, but he mentally brushed it away as if it were the size and weight of a fleck of lint. There was no time for jealousy. Jeryline was a pretty girl, she was balanced keenly on the hot edge of life, she had that inner kind of, of . . . *something* . . . that made him know she was special, that she was more than just a girl doing time in a hotel instead of a prison, but a silly love affair with her was the last thing he needed. He felt an attraction to her that bordered strangely on hate, a crazy desire to either beat her senseless or sweep her up in his arms. This had not ever happened before, not that he could remember, but he had lived a long, long time and had forgotten much of the past.

He stopped at the desk and tapped a finger on it.

Irene looked up from what she was ciphering. "What now?"

He shrugged, using more of his eyebrows than his shoulders. "Have you seen Jeryline? Or the deputy?"

She frowned. "Not since—oh jeez, everything is so crazy—not since we tried to make it out the front door. Did the deputy ever explain what stopped them from getting to the car, like we'd all planned?"

"Same thing that happened out back," Brayker said. "You can't outrun those things, and you can't beat them physically. Outsmart them, yes. Outrun them, no."

She put on a pensive look, idly scratching one ear with the eraser tip of the pencil. "Will they ever leave, Mr. Brayker? Is the whole world being attacked like this?"

He shook his head. "It's not the end of the world, no. It's just a fight between two opposing forces."

“Good? And evil? Sounds Biblical after all.”

“In a sense.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “About Jeryline,” he said. “Any idea where she might be? Any favorite place she likes to go when she’s afraid?”

“Her? Afraid?” Irene shook her head, scowling. “That little twat is not afraid of anything—or maybe one thing. Work. Hard work. You have to kick your foot deeply inside her ass to get her to move at all.”

He frowned. “How much do you pay her?”

She frowned back. “Uh, about two dollars an hour. Before taxes.”

He let his arms fall. “For two bucks an hour, you’re lucky she even gets out of bed.”

Irene aimed the pencil at Brayker, stabbing the air as she talked. “I’ve seen your eyes,” she said. “I’m not a dummy. The first second you’re alone with that girl you’ll both be tearing each other’s clothes off. I know your type. I know your MO.”

Brayker raised his eyebrows. “MO?”

“Cop talk,” she said. “You hang around Tupper long enough and you start talking like he does. Or like he did, I guess.” She put the pencil down, visibly sobered. “Shouldn’t we call the coroner or something? He’s stationed in Junction City.”

Brayker twitched a little. “Do you really think the phones here still work, Irene? That we could have simply called the cops to save us all along?”

“What cops?” she shot back. “Both of them are right here with us. This is New Mexico, you know. There’s more Gila monsters than people in this state. And more Eskimos than cops, practically.”

“Then try the phone,” he said, weary of this.

She reached for it. “Somebody left it off the goddamn hook,” she said and ducked. When she rose up she had the receiver in her hand, an old-fashioned black job that had probably been installed in the 1930s, but it sported a new white spiral cord. She stuck it to her ear, frowned, hung it up, tried again.

“Dead,” she muttered. “But if your pal cut the phone wire, how come he left the electricity burning?”

Brayker knew the answer immediately. “He thinks that we’ll be concocting escape plans in the light, plans that depend on the lights all working so we can see. If we try to run again, off they go and we’re all stumbling around in the dark.”

“Devious,” she agreed. “So those demon things can see in the dark with those big yellow eyeballs of theirs? Can they?”

“Yes.”

“And as long as we stick together and sit tight, the lights won’t go off?”

He rubbed his nose. “Actually, there’s only one rule in this fight, and it’s the only rule the Salesman has always obeyed.”

“Oh?” She touched her chin. “What rule is it?”

“It’s rule number one.”

“Which is?”

A small smile lifted the corners of his lips. “The rule is this, Irene: there are no rules.”

He turned and stumped away, leaving her just as confused and unhappy as people always were when Silas Brayker came into their lives.

8

There was something about the old basement that Jeryline felt comfortable with; in a strange way it was like discovering a new home.

She was hunched in one corner with a tall red candle stuck into the dirt beside her, watching the shadows around her flicker and shift as it burned. It appeared to Jeryline that the church overhead, which was now a *motel* (Irene go to *hell,* by the by) had been built on the foundation of a much older building, maybe a farmhouse that burned to the ground, maybe a general store that supplied the early settlers with food and tools. It was obvious, anyway, that this basement was not a part of the original structure of Irene's motel overhead.

When things had gotten too hairy with Irene in the past, Jeryline had found this place to be a good refuge until the storm had blown over. There had been a time not long ago that Irene had chased her around with a lamp, swearing she would smash it over her head; another time she was trying to whip her with an electrical cord Jeryline had accidentally severed while using the old Black & Decker ripsaw to cut replacement pieces for the motel's outer siding.

Jeryline was convinced that Irene did not know there was a basement here. Despite her fire and brimstone she was basically a frightened old woman trying to make it in a hard and cruel world. To get down here you had to duck into the closet that had the preserves in it, feel around with your foot until a piece of the flooring gave way slightly, then bend and remove the trapdoor. The best part was that once you were on the makeshift ladder beneath it and had lowered the trapdoor back into place, no one could ever find you. At least not Irene, and who should know the place better than her?

Only Jeryline, who had combed every inch of this old structure, from the ridiculous old steeple overhead that had once housed a church bell and was now full of leaves and cobwebs and bird nests, to down here, where nobody ever came. It was much the same reason she had memorized the layout of the women's prison; she had to keep one step ahead of her captors if the time ever came to escape.

There was another secret thing she did down here besides hide from Irene, actually. The crumbling walls were made of old, brittle bricks, and at a spot just to her right, at about shoulder level as she sat in the dirt, was a pack of cigarettes jammed inside a deep crack. In the work-

release/probation program she was not allowed to use drugs or alcohol or tobacco, as if a puff of pot, or a can of beer, or a cigarette might send her on a wild killing frenzy. The wonder was that caffeine was not on the list she was supposed to abide by. So down here, smirking at her captors and their rules, she could break the law in peace.

The cigarette of choice tonight was a Chesterfield, which her secret supplier had bought the last time he went to the store in Avery. Her supplier was none other than Wally Enfield, whom she had befriended on her first day here. At first the boardinghouse (motel) rumors were that Wally was not operating on all eight cylinders, was addicted to both the post office job he loved, and addicted to his love for a certain unnamed person who happened to live here—gosh-golly-gee, who could that be? But by talking with him one evening, by gently acquiring a sense of who he was, Jeryline arrived at her own opinion of the man: none of his cylinders were firing at all.

Yes, he was crazy in love; Irene was crazy about her shoddy motel, Cordelia was crazy about men who made her feel young again, everybody who roomed here was crazy in one way or another. Maybe that's why Brayker seemed to fall into place so well, she supposed; that was why, when the stuntmen in the designer wetsuits showed up, nobody keeled over dead on the spot. The Mission Inn was always open to such types: they merely had to sign the register and watch an evening of TV programs that had no sound, fall asleep to the rhythm of Cordelia's squeaking bedsprings as she humped a customer, and arise to the clang of Jeryline's serving spoon against the breakfast pot.

She leaned a bit and pulled the pack of cigarettes out from between the bricks. It was not so much an addiction with her, as she could take these or leave them. It was basically her style of getting away with something—*anything*—that Irene Galvin did not know about.

The candle made a handy lighter. She leaned back again and blew a leisurely cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, which was of course the floor for everyone above. Between the thick, dark beams that held everything up were cobwebs. Acres of cobwebs. What were they really? she wondered. Actual spiderwebs, or just strands of collected dust? There was no evidence of spiders down here: what the hell could they catch and eat, anyway? It was like the dark side of the moon, and it smelled like dirt and mold.

With a small shrug she pushed the pack of cigarettes back into the proper crack, and regarded the darkness outside her circle of light. Were there some secret things here that she had not yet found? The place was actually huge, though barely deep enough to stand in. The dirt floor was a convolution of lumps and valleys, the air was as dry as

sandpaper despite the rain outside, the dark spoke of age and forgotten things, of the dead people who had dug this basement, the dead people who had laid these bricks.

Knock it off, she warned herself. Once or twice she had gotten scared down here, but not by any ghosts that she knew of. Her candle had twice sputtered out on a sudden gust of breeze—but where could a breeze come from? She had heard, just as she was lighting a cigarette a few weeks ago, a long and unhappy moan drift out of the darkness. Rather than dash up from here and burst through the trapdoor in terror, she had made herself small and waited for it to go away. She had years ago learned a great lesson among the many lessons of her life, and it was this: do not fear the dead. It is the bastards who are still alive you have to worry about.

She went back to her cigarette again, trying not to think of anything but the local calender that was inching, day by day, toward the time of her freedom. What would she do on that blessed day? Fly to Paris. Fly to Rome. Bask in the luxury of a Mediterranean beach, sip wine with a count and countess.

She spit in the dirt between her knees. Chesterfields sucked and so did her dreams. She had grown up with a mother who was quick with a fist, and a father who did not exist. Paris attracted her because it was the only far-away place she had known of as a child, and seemed romantic, judging by the pictures. Well, here she was at the age of twenty, sitting in the dirt of an ancient basement, sneaking a smoke and waiting for her work-release time to be over so that she could leave. She had made no progress toward her goal, and the goal itself was mightily reduced: instead of aching to go to Paris, she was aching simply to get the hell out of New Mexico.

She brought the cigarette close to her face and blew across its orange tip, creating a shower of sparks that spiraled crazily into the darkness. Her life was like them, in a terrible way. She was wild and hot, as hot as sparks, but fate kept blowing more darkness her way, darkness that threatened to extinguish her. This deal with Brayker all of a sudden—who in the hell *was* he, anyway? He pops in from nowhere and all hell breaks loose—literally! Demons of various shapes and sizes crawl out of the night, the Sheriff gets killed by a guy who looks like Billy the Kid in designer jeans, Brayker uses drops of blood to seal up windows and doors, lines of fire burst alive when he does, and on, and on . . .

Sudden, sour-smelling air gusted across her. The candle flickered, then went out. Jeryline pressed her back against the wall, frozen in place with the cigarette halfway to her mouth, her eyes jerking open as wide as they could get. The smell of smoky wax drifted up from the

dead candle, burning her eyes.

Something, off to the right. Some kind of presence, some kind of thing; she could feel it, feel that she was no longer alone.

Impossible, she told herself. This basement was dark and dry, and nothing, save a handful of starving spiders, could possibly be down here.

She heard something, something that rustled. An image popped into her mind: Brayker's demons, having slaughtered everyone upstairs, were converging on her now. The gust of wind had been the foul breath of one of the things, all were down here encircling her in this utter blackness.

Her heart squeezed painfully inside her chest; her blood thumped hard in her veins. She had matches. She simply had to light one, look around, chide herself for being the fool, and light the candle again.

But she could not. Being killed by demons had to be a lousy way to die. Death by lighting a match, seeing them, and going insane with terminal fright, that would be worse.

She waited, breathless, her senses as keen as an antelope's when it sniffs lion in the air. Sweat sprang alive on her forehead and began to trickle into her eyes. But still—

Nothing.

She was breathing as quietly through her open mouth as she could, needing more oxygen but not daring to take it, torn between a future of wildly scooping out a hole in the dirt in which to hide or jumping up in the dark and trying to make it to the trap door. No longer could she convince herself that monsters do not exist. They were real and they were here because Brayker had brought them. The last survivors of Wormwood would all be dead by morning.

A gentle puff of dust struck the top of her hand. She clenched her teeth together to keep from screaming. Tiny tentacles tickled her knuckles; a cold nose pressed against her little finger. Unable to hold on any longer, she whipped to the side and tried to gouge the Chesterfield into the creature's face.

It worked. The cigarette exploded into a starburst of orange sparks. Irene's cat let out a high-pitched squeal and jumped on Jeryline's chest, skittered her way up to the top of her head, and stood on all fours with her claws hooked into Jeryline's scalp. Before her mind could decode what had happened, Jeryline let out a crazy screech and batted the cat away, simultaneously jumping to her feet. The top of her head thunked hard against a floor joist and she dropped down again, dazed and finally understanding. She slumped back against the brick wall with her head bruised and bloody, and let her eyes fall shut.

Just the cat, she was thinking. Just the fucking cat. In the horror movies it was funny when everybody went apeshit and the monster turned out to be the cat. It was the oldest trick in the book, a cliché, the sure mark of a screenwriter needing a vacation. But it was real here, the cat had scared *years* out of her life, and she did not know if she should scoop Cleo up and hug her, or scoop her up and smash her brains out against the wall, the terrorizing little black bitch.

Instead she set about lighting the candle again, but her shaking hands botched the job four times before she got it going.

9

Wally Enfield was actually two people on this bleak night at the Mission Inn: the happiest man on earth and the most frustrated man on earth. After more than a year of secretly adoring Cordelia, of opening doors for her and offering chairs to her, of hauling a breakfast tray upstairs for her when she had worked too hard and not gotten enough sleep—after a year of this, she had finally noticed him as more than just scrawny, comical Wally Enfield, the boarder here who happened to work at the post office up in Junction City until getting fired today. No, she now knew the depth of his love. She would abandon prostitution, marry him; they would buy a house someplace, any place, that wasn't Wormwood. Wally could have left Wormwood a long time ago, but he had sacrificed his happiness in order to be with Cordelia. And now, presto! He shoots a demon and becomes her hero. Why hadn't he thought of it years ago?

Then the frustration intrudes: they were in love, sheer bliss awaited, but fate had pushed the HOLD button on the telephone of life, happiness was delayed until the boardinghouse was no longer besieged by demons. Demons! And everybody thought Romeo and Juliet were star-crossed lovers, the pansies.

He and Cordelia were sitting together on the carpeted steps that led upstairs, ready to bolt upwards if things got sticky again. Wally was holding her large hands in his clammy, smaller hands, inhaling the glory of her perfume, knowing that at last he had earned the key to the secrets of her womanhood. Nearly swooning, he said, "I wonder what time it is."

She kissed him lightly on the tip of his nose. "You've got a watch on, silly." She lifted his wrist, cocking her head to see. "Just barely past midnight, if this guy on the dial is pointing right. That's not a Mickey Mouse watch, is it?"

He shook his head. "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe. The little guy on the second hand is Skeleton They're enemies."

She stared at him uneasily, then smiled. "You'd make a great father someday, Wally."

He giggled. "You'd make a great mother, too."

They both were seized by a spasm of laughter. Just as Wally was ready to either quit laughing or upchuck, a shadow fell over them, and he looked up.

Roach. With his muscles stuffed inside a greasy T-shirt he looked like a short-order cook at a biker bar. He inspected Wally up and down, snorted, and focused on Cordelia. “You and me got to talk,” he said.

Wally lifted his butt up and planted it on a higher step. “I hope you’re ashamed of yourself,” he chided Roach. “Abandoning Cordelia like that.”

Roach hiked an eyebrow up one notch. “Not particularly, no.” He glanced at Cordelia, and winked. “So Wally,” he went on, “I’m getting out of here. And guess who’s going to help me?”

Cordelia shook her head. “No way, buster.”

“Fuck you,” he snarled. “I’m trying to talk to my friend Wally here.”

Wally rose up. “You watch your mouth in front of her!”

“Watch this,” Roach grunted, and took two fistfuls of Wally’s shirt. “You don’t fuck with me, you little toad. You might want to die here, but I don’t. Brayker says the long tall dude wants that key, and I say we’re going to give it to him.”

Cordelia was on her feet now. “Haven’t you caused enough trouble already? Can’t you just leave a body alone?”

He eyed her with fake indignation. “Excuse me, but this is man-to-man between pals.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Oh, he’s not your pal, Roach. Assholes don’t have friends at all. And you are most definitely an asshole.”

He released Wally. One hand snapped out and clamped around her wrist. “We got a few last details to work out, Cordy. You come with me.”

He marched up the steps, towing her. “Excuse us, Wally old boy. That’s a good sport.”

Wally raised a finger, opened his mouth, looked down at his hands, made fists of them. He took one strong step up to follow, wavered on the second, sat down on the third, and propped his chin on his hands.

“Son of a bitch,” he murmured. He glanced down and saw that Irene, seated at the desk, was looking up at him. “Son of a bitch!” he screamed. “I’ll kill him!”

Irene yawned. “Take a Valium, Wally. Better yet, take two.”

He covered his face with his hands and groaned.

Roach twisted the knob and kicked the door open, hit the light switch with his elbow, and pushed Cordelia across the room. She pitched onto the bed and bounced a few times, then sat up.

He crushed the door shut and aimed a shaking finger at her. “Looky

here, bitch. You go around telling people I went chicken-shit out there, and pretty soon the whole town's gonna believe it."

She closed her eyes. "What town?"

"You nevermind that, Cordy. You can screw Beaver Cleaver down there all night and all day for what I care, but don't you be telling people I'm chicken-shit."

"What people?"

He took a step toward her. "Everybody I know, that's who. I got a reputation and it don't involve the word chicken-shit."

"Actually," she said, "chicken-shit is two words. Chicken, which you are, and shit, which you is."

He crossed the little room in two rapid steps, cocking his arm. Before she could duck, he swiped his knuckles across her face in a vicious backhand that sent her head crashing against the wall. Two of her framed pictures jumped off their nails and slid noisily to the floor. "Don't you fuck with me!" he howled in her face. His anger had caused a case of deodorant breakdown, and the smell drifting off him was thick and ugly. "You save your fucking for Beaver Cleaver down there, if he's even got a dick you can find without a microscope. You ain't nothing but a two-dollar whore and he ain't nothing but another paying customer."

Cordelia touched a finger to a corner of her mouth: blood came away with it. "Get out," she said tonelessly. "I'm tired of you."

He eyed her, then the room, maybe searching for something to throw or break. In the end he flapped his lips to imitate a fart, shuffled around, made the sound again, hauled the door open and stood there, then went out.

Cordelia waited, listening. His feet thumped satisfactorily down the stairs, perhaps stopping at Wally's perch, but no arguing voices rose up, just Roach's laughter. Cordelia sank onto the bed while tears tried to rise hotly into her eyes, and begged those tears to go away. None of this was new to her: over the years she had fallen for a dozen guys, hoped beyond hope that they would love her in return, and put an end to her humiliating career with a vow of marriage. Roach was only the latest in a string of broken dreams.

She was dabbing at her nose with a corner of the bedsheet, trying to prepare herself for Wally, when a voice drifted into her ears. She frowned, shook her head, got to her feet, and listened hard.

Poor Cordelia . . .

She pressed a hand between her breasts, her eyes widening. Somebody was playing a guitar nearby, was serenading her.

It seems downright criminal to treat such a pretty girl that way. Oh, did I

say pretty? I should have said beautiful!

The voice was coming through the window, had to be, as if Wally were hanging upside down with his heels hooked into the gutter overhead, singing while playing a Spanish guitar. Could it be? Was he so madly in love, and so acrobatic? She thought not.

You are so beautiful to me, Cordelia . . .

She went to the window, used her thumb to push up the little brass hook that kept it shut, and spread it apart.

The man whom Brayker had been calling the Salesman was standing below in the rain, wearing a jeweled sombrero, an exotic white shirt, and brown leather pants with sequins sewn down the seams. His guitar was glistening with raindrops, and he gently strummed it as he gazed up at her. By some trick of the night he was surrounded by an aura of pale blue, singing to her from an oval of light.

Poor Cordelia . . .

His face seemed twisted with grief, his glistening eyes full with tears of pain for her.

How you have suffered . . .

"I have," she said, leaning out. "I have."

I know . . . *you are too beautiful. No one understands* . . .

She pulled in a breath but it caught in her throat. "Wally does," she whispered.

And so have all the others, Cordelia, and they have murdered your heart. They thought you were a whore. That is a terrible word to use on someone who is really just a sad little girl looking for love, isn't it?

Twin tears dropped down her cheeks in unison. The Salesman was right: Wally would pretend to love her for a few weeks and drop her. Every man before him had done the same thing, and all for a couple freebies. Ripped her soul to shreds, just for some freebies.

The Salesman's voice was barely a whisper. *I promise you my love forever,* he said, and put his guitar on the ground.

A moment later he was scaling the gutter pipe as lightly and noiselessly as an angel. Rather than lean in through the window, he motioned her to lean out, which she did.

He stroked her hair. "Cordelia. My love. I have come for you at last."

"Thank you," she whispered, weeping with joy.

His arms enfolded her. Their eyes locked.

He kissed her long and hard.

Wally jumped up when Roach clumped past him on the stairway.

Roach grinned at him. “She’s all yours, pal. Hope you like sloppy seconds. Hah!”

Wally, who had a hundred things to say to the bastard, a hundred imagined karate chops to kill him, wound up saying and doing nothing at all. Roach laughed as he walked out of sight, while Wally performed a slow burn. The day would come soon, when he would show Roach—and everybody else—the real man that was hidden inside his bony little body. Already he had saved a life and won the girl of his dreams. He only hoped the others here who had seen him slay the demon, would shrug off his marksmanship to pure beginner’s luck. For today, he had to keep being Wally Enfield. In a few days they would all know his power, especially those dumb fucks at the post office.

He turned to go upstairs, but hesitated. Of course Roach had not been up there long enough to abuse her body, though quite surely long enough to abuse her mind. Probably told a batch of lies about Wally, told her Wally was impotent or queer or a deserter from the Marines, something like that. So if Wally went barging up right now she might turn on him, abandon her admiration, wreck his plans for marriage, point out that he was small and skinny and was getting bald real fast.

He turned to go back down, stopped and chewed on his lower lip for a trace of time, turned around again. What had Roach said to Cordelia, what secrets had he exposed? Wally bought a Penthouse magazine every so often at the cigar shop in Avery, but who could know that? He had once run an ad in the Junction City newspaper, one of those personal ones where you try to get women to date you, but he had used a post office box for *that* fiasco. So, then, what?

Maybe nothing. Maybe Roach had just been begging her for another chance; she was a fine catch in the elusive ocean of women. If so, she had rejected Roach, and therefore aroused his anger. Wally had triumphed over Roach again.

He took an upward step, stopped, and turned. What if Cordelia had locked her door . . . not locked it against Roach, but against *him.* Maybe she—

“Make up your goddamn mind!” Irene shrieked downstairs at the top of her lungs.

Wally charged up the stairs. At Cordelia’s door he knocked softly, waited, gritted his teeth almost hard enough to break them, knocked harder.

No reply. Roach had murdered her.

He pounded the door, beginning to sweat, waited, then gathered his courage and opened it himself, ready to see either Cordelia hating

him, or Cordelia dead. Both would be equally catastrophic.

He eased his head inside. The light was off, but he could see against the backdrop of the window that she was standing there looking out into the night.

His voice was husky and dry when he spoke: “Cordelia?”

She said nothing. The storm overhead seemed to be abating, by the sound of it, but lightning still flashed and popped in the distance.

“C-c-Cordy? Can I call you that now? I won’t if you don’t like it.”

He heard her sigh against the window panes. His heart tumbled into his shoes. She was mad at him. Or maybe just disappointed. Or maybe loved Roach after all and was going to hurl herself out of the window.

He advanced a step, two steps, three. There was a weird burned smell in the room, as if she’d left a hotplate on too long, or let coffee in a pot boil down to fudge. Cordelia had not yet turned around, had not yet responded at all. She was wearing her familiar blue silk robe now, a gift from a boyfriend of the past.

“Cordelia?” His voice was a tiny whisper. “Cordy?”

She turned, just a shape in the dark. “Hello, Wally.”

He swallowed. His Adam’s apple seemed to be jumping up and down in his parched throat like a monkey on a stick. “Are you . . . okay?”

She sighed again, but it was not a sigh of anger or scorn. “I realized something about myself tonight, Wally. My whole life, I’ve avoided the guys who truly love me. Like you. You really do love me, don’t you, Wally?”

He took one of her hands, and dropped to his knees. This night was so magical, so unearthly, so full of danger and promise, of strange lightning and new beginnings. “I have always loved you,” he croaked. “From the first time I saw you get your mail out of the box here.”

She tugged him upward. “Look at me, my love. And let me look at you.”

He fell into her arms, hugged her fiercely, then pulled back to look at her.

A brilliant strobe of lightning filled the room with sharp white light. Cordelia was so flawless, so beautiful, her skin so porcelain perfect, that he could no longer speak.

She took his head in her warm, gentle hands, and silently pressed her lips against his.

10

Brayker was prowling.

It occurred to him that he would have made a good burglar, the kind so good that they were called cat burglars by an admiring police force. He had been inside this revamped church less than two hours, and already knew its littlest nooks and crannies. There was, though, one thing he had not yet found, and for this omission he might lose his official burglar's badge, his official burglar's membership card, which usually entitled one to a free Coke upon the purchase of an official McBurglar Burger.

He was in the kitchen. He paused to tap his forehead with a finger and close his eyes. He had gotten no more than a few snatches of sleep in the last eight days and it was showing pretty badly now. He seemed to recall a time when the manufacturers of breakfast cereals put things like magic decoder rings or cryptic treasure maps inside the box of cereal. He had a memory of digging such things out for a little kid, a niece or nephew somewhere down his family tree, of trying to get the damned prize out without scattering cereal all over the table. But that would have been in the fourties, the fifties. His relatives were all much older now than he, and all contact with them had been lost. It was for the better.

Brayker took a moment to stop, yawn, and stretch. He had hidden from the Salesman in many towns, many houses, and knew the design structures fairly well. This building of Irene's, this former church, was not laid on a concrete slab, which had been a popular architectural sleight-of-hand in the fifties, and it therefore had to have a crawlspace below the floor. Maybe barely deep enough to actually crawl through, maybe a basement so big it could house a ping-pong table and a set of bunk beds, a family room, a wet bar with beer on tap. Either way, it didn't matter much to the stability of the building. What mattered was that the Salesman and his ceaselessly cavorting friends would find it, and use it, if it were there.

A few moments ago he had felt a distinct but soundless bump from below that had sent a small vibration through the floorboards. On the heels of that odd sensation came a very, very muffled scream or shout. Activity in the basement? Could be. But the demons did not have any vocal abilities beyond screeches and hisses, so the screamer, or shouter, had to be human. For a fact Brayker knew that Irene and

Roach, Wally and Cordelia, and Uncle Willie, were here with him, in various findable locations. The only missing persons right now were Jeryline and deputy Martel, but Jeryline was a volatile firecracker of a woman and Martel was an overzealous clod. For all Brayker knew, Martel might be crawling around outside on his belly, hunting for the two pistols that had been left behind in all the confusion. It was, actually, a pretty good idea.

Brayker resumed his tour of the establishment, gnawing a fingernail as he walked. Every place that he had suspected, every possible point of entrance he had found, was sealed. The key was in its pouch, weighing heavily around his neck as usual, a crude and simple bit of metalwork hammered out of iron and silver, once dotted with jewels long since fallen off or stolen. The glass orb was nearly empty of its liquid, but he felt—hoped—that the time to refill it was coming fast.

He turned and stalked to Irene's so-called entertainment center, full of impatience. The Salesman was not outside dozing the night away under a tree; he was searching for a way to get inside. And he had more talents than just making creepy creatures pop up out of the ground. His power of mind control was awesome, his ability to bend the will of even the most hardheaded man to his own ends was unmatched. If there was a crawlspace here, it would at the very least be ventilated, which meant an unsealed opening guarded at best by a louvre or screen wire.

Uncle Willie was sitting on one of the couches, ignoring the television, looking around with uneasy eyes, squirming a little. It came to Brayker that he had been awfully hard on the old geezer when he ran into him at that gas station tonight. "How might it be going?" he asked Willie.

Willie jerked. Through the hole in his beard that was his mouth a tongue poked out, and he licked his lips. "Mighty dry right now," he said. "Do you suppose Irene keeps any liquor hereabouts? I used to come here many a time and do odd jobs, before she got ahold of Jeryline. But do you suppose? Maybe a bottle of genteel wine, even?"

Brayker smiled. "Tell you what, old Willie. I'll go ask her right now. Pay her top dollar, too."

Willie relaxed. "Thanks to you, sir. Bless you."

Brayker turned, glad he had a way to ease the hard feelings the old dude might have harbored, and took a step with the mental pictures of Irene and a bottle fixed in his mind before fatigue could muddle his thoughts and cause him to forget.

Something, some wooden thing, bumped slightly to his left. He froze in place, cocking his head, straining to hear.

Thump . . . scratch-scratch . . .

He aimed himself toward it, suddenly as alert and wary as a cop at a shootout.

Scratch . . .

The sounds were drifting from inside the closet he'd just inspected. He reached into the pouch and clamped his hand around the key, and moved toward it.

Thump . . .

He stopped at the door, thinking about but immediately canceling the idea of pressing his ear to it. If a webbed fist shot through it the shards of wood would be pointy enough to kill him.

Scratch . . .

The knob was not much more than a little button. He tweezed it between two fingers and turned it, breathless and ready.

"Them's just preserves in there," Uncle Willie blared at the back of his neck. Brayker whirled, whipping the door open in the process, and jumped to the side while simultaneously jerking the key out, his teeth baring themselves for the coming fight.

Nothing happened. Gorged on adrenaline, his heart racing and his blood pounding sickly in his ears, he shifted his eyes to Willie. "Don't," he was able to say, but barely. "Don't do that."

Willie made faces indicating apology, shrugged, pretended there was a zipper installed between his lips, and zipped it.

Brayker gave his attention back to the closet. The preserves still sat as before, nothing was moving as before, there was no news to be found in there at all.

"I would swear," Brayker muttered.

Thump.

He dropped to his haunches, straining to see in the dimness. A dark, almost invisible line on the floorboards was widening, shifting. When his eyes adjusted to the light, Brayker could see the impressions of fingers, even whole hands, in the dust.

He looked back at Willie. "Trapdoor. Knew it had to be here someplace." He put the key away.

Scritch-scritch-scritch . . .

Willie groaned as he sank to his knees, which popped and crackled. "Oof. A man my age, I ought to know better. So Brayker, what's making that racket down there?"

Brayker got his fingernails under the small lip that kept the trapdoor from falling inside, and lifted it up. Dry, sour air puffed up. He leaned to see and was face to face with Cleo the cat. She was perched on the topmost step of a crude ladder that led down into

darkness. He reached for her but she jumped through the opening between his outstretched arms, bounded up into the closet, and scurried away. The trapdoor clattered back into place.

"Damn cat," Uncle Willie muttered as he watched her vanish up the stairwell.

"We might be thanking that cat before the night's over," Brayker replied. "Willie, go ask Irene if she has a flashlight. If not, then some candles. If I'm thinking right, this might be the safest place to hole up."

Willie stood again, tendons and bones cracking. "Oof. Gimme a minute. If she don't have any of that stuff, I can make us some torches."

Brayker nodded. "Whatever it takes."

Deputy Bob Martel was outside, crawling around on his belly, a man-shaped loaf of mud. The rain, which had just about ended, had created less mud on Irene's short stretch of lawn than he had hoped, so he had worked hard to get filthy from top to bottom like this. It happened to be that he had been to a movie or two in his life, among them *Predator,* the science-fiction job with Arnie Schwarzenegger. The alien hunting him could not see light; rather, it saw heat, and so Arnie coated himself with cold mud. Nifty, eh?

So, just to be on the safe side, Martel was now a living mud pie as he inched toward Sheriff Tupper's police cruiser. The ruse, so far, had seemed to work; that or the Salesman and his employees had clocked out for the night. They were not to be seen, at least not on this side of the Mission Inn.

He had about six yards left to go. At first he had gone on a search for his pistol, which Wally had stolen and then lost in the heat of battle, the little shit, then remembered Roach losing the other one in about the same area near the front porch, but do you suppose he could find them? Risking his life for a set of police specials with a questionable number of bullets left in them? In the morning they would be lying in plain sight, no doubt, unless the Salesman had already picked them up.

But the battle was not yet lost. Sheriff Tupper carried a short-barreled riot gun in his car, a nice 12-gauge Remington pump-style that could blow the living shit out of anything, man or beast, Salesman or demon. It was not fair that everybody else was racking up the body count of the bad guys while Martel had yet to shoot anything; the old Remington would change the score soon.

Hopefully. But with the rain easing up, the clouds would probably

be scattering soon, and oh-holy-night, if the moon came out and the demons used, after all, plain old light to see, Martel was a gone goose. Woe to the survivors here: without a lawman around they were doomed.

He paused. It suddenly struck him that once inside the car, he could radio Mavis up in Junction City, tell her to get every cop in the state to haul ass to Wormwood, where all hell had busted loose and a lone deputy was about to defend the Mission Inn to the last bullet.

Last bullet? Holy Hannah, did Tupper carry any spare shells for the shotgun? Did he even bother to keep it loaded, seeing as he had carried it for ten or more years and never once found the need to fire it? This whole shotgun thing might be shakier than Martel thought. It had to boil down to this: the gun was either unloaded with a box of shells in the glove compartment, or loaded with all the five rounds it would hold. One way or another, there were some shells in that car.

If the shotgun was even there, though.

He dropped his head down onto his fists. These mental gymnastics were wearying his brain. So far tonight he had seen a horrendous crash, seen a burning man walk away from it wearing a smoking jacket, had seen the same man in cowboy duds later, saw Sheriff Tupper get his face caved in, and saw a mysterious guy with a mysterious key. And the demons, don't forget the demons. Could it get any more bizarre?

Yet once, and not too many hours ago, he had bemoaned the fact that Tupper got all the exciting cases. Well, scratch that. This case was *too* exciting. In fact, when he got done crawling to the car he might, he just might, start it up and drive home. This case was too complex, there were too many chiefs and not enough Indians, and besides, he hadn't eaten for a long, long time.

The police cruiser was black and white. For a fraction of a moment the moon drilled its beams through the clouds hard enough to make the white parts glow in the dark. Martel mashed his face to the ground, forgetting that he had made it to the gravel section already, and nearly broke off a tooth.

"Mo-fo," he muttered, spitting out pebbles. In the army they gave you combat pay in a war, ninety dollars a month extra, but not here. Here, he collected his annual $12,820 no matter if he slept in his car or gunned down bank robbers every Tuesday and Thursday. As a matter of fact, his shift of duty was supposed to end at eleven and it was much later than that. Perhaps, a newcomer to New Mexico might say, he would be paid some nice overtime bucks, so quit bitching. But no, such things did not happen in this fair state. This county, actually. Maybe the state cops got overtime, but not the Deputy Sheriff of

Diamond County, no sir.

The moon went away and he resumed crawling, in a much nastier mood now, not wanting to read the obituaries in the morning paper and find out he was dead. This crawling over gravel was a noisy affair, much noisier than sliding across the wet grass, which of course had ruined his uniform, turned it green all over the front, while the mud had stained it brown all over the back. He could not see these special effects in the dark, but he knew with utter positivity that it was all true. So who would pay for a new uniform?

Don't even ask.

He decided the crawling could go to hell, and worked his way to his feet. The car was three steps away. He strode to it with all the pride and anger his glands could produce. Wet rocks cascaded from his clothes. He jerked the door open and leaned inside.

It was still slightly warm from the day's heat. The scent of dusty carpet was thin and lifeless in the air. The shotgun was under the front seat, and Martel tugged it out with a grin creasing the mud of his face. "Gotcha, bitch," he whispered. He straightened, and pumped a round into the chamber.

Suddenly he whirled, his teeth bared in a huge, evil smile. "Be smokin yer asses," he breathed. "Make my day, mo-fo. Make my fucking day."

He turned, stifling a chuckle. Artillery shells could blow people's asses off many miles away, but with the Remington here the killing was up close and personal. In his military training he had learned that the shotgun was banned as a weapon of war by the Geneva Convention, whatever the hell that was. It seemed that in World War I the American soldiers, the Doughboys, used shotguns to clean out trenches when they found any Germans still alive after an attack. It was so horrible, so they said, that this big convention on rules of war got together some place and decided the nicest way to kill people was probably the best way. No shotguns, no poison gas, cool stuff like that. People back then were so damned queasy.

But not Deputy Martel. He popped the glove box open and felt inside for shells. No such luck. He stuck his arm under the seat again and could dredge up only a flat, empty bottle of Fleischmann's vodka. He wagged his head. My oh my. Tupper was a lush.

He tossed it on the floor, then scanned things one last time, trying to decide. Stay here? He pumped the shotgun about halfway and saw a fresh yellow shell waiting to slam into the chamber. The only way to check how many were inside was to pump them all out, which he did not want to do, not if some Creature from the Black Lagoon was waddling his way. He laid the gun across the seat, ready for it in an

instant, frowning as thoughts bubbled and burst throughout his brain. Could he get out of this nightmare and wind up with some kind of heroism medal? That would add to his paycheck. Could he maybe capture one of these creatures, and be famous for that, as if he were a scientist of note? Or would he die here, along with everybody else?

He sat inside. The creatures were gone. The fun was over. He needed food and he needed sleep. Anyway, he had to go back to Junction City to report Tupper's death, fill out reports on the crash on Highway 47, make a diagram of the disaster, maybe other stuff.

He drew his legs in and pulled the door shut. "Duty calls," he said to himself, and reached for the key to get this baby fired up.

The windshield shattered with a terrific *crunch!* Pebbles of glass belched across his face and chest. He instinctively raised his arms to shield himself, his brain not yet able to process this new bit of data. A webbed claw the size of a catcher's mitt smashed through the window to his left, deluging him with more glass. It pawed at him. He screamed and backpedaled across the seat, hammering the steering wheel and that claw with his feet, a mud-man jerking and shaking like a prisoner being fried in the electric chair.

The claw raked down the inner seam of his trousers, tearing it open to expose one hairy white leg that was remarkably skinny, considering the size of the rest of his body. He shrieked and bellowed, his eyes as big as jumbo marbles, his hair standing on end.

The demon worked its huge, misshapen head through the ruined window. Martel found new reasons to scream; the thing was plug-ugly, almost as plug-ugly as Betty Newton, the fattest, ugliest girl at Junction City High, whom he used to hound and embarrass in the hallways by making elephant noises or shouting *ship ahoy!* As Martel's mind began now to sort out the seriousness of this invasion, he was for one brief moment grateful that it was a demon, and not Betty Newton clawing her way in, so fat and ugly was she.

Betty's stunt double clapped both claws around Martel's right leg and began to haul him out. As he fought to stay inside, Martel found himself being shaped and twisted into forms he had never imagined his body could form. He hooked his elbows firmly around the steering wheel and saw with surprise that it could be bent almost in half before the metal-reinforced plastic snapped. He tried hanging onto the rearview mirror, a seat-belt buckle, the gearshift, the brake, the seat, the door itself, but all for naught. His last handhold, the outside mirror, broke off and he thunked face down on the gravel, this time losing a front tooth in earnest.

"Yaaahhhhhh!" he tried screaming as he was dragged away. It came to him that he had not even tried to get the shotgun, though it had

been poking him in the back the whole time.

"Yaaahhhhhh! Wahoooo! Pleeeeeeeeeease!"

None of this impressed the monster. Martel was dragged on his face across the lawn, his fingers combing furrows in the wet grass. Just before the dragging was over he felt a cold, hard thing bump from his crotch to his chin. He grabbed at it.

One of the pistols. One of the pistols!

The demon dropped him. Martel rolled over onto his back, the pistol hidden between his arm and ribcage, realizing that after all was said and done, the army had at least taught him how to aim a gun and pull the trigger.

Shapes moved out of the dark. Martel whipped his head from side to side.

More demons. Two more, then three. Then four. They formed a circle around him, hissing and drooling. Martel brought the pistol out and clutched it with both hands, aiming here, aiming there, his face drawn up in a snarl of fear and hate.

The one who reminded him so much of Betty Newton leaned down. It seemed to grin at him. Its jaw hinged open.

Martel fired. One eye became a puckered hole. The thing's skull ruptured and began to leak black fluid in jagged lines, yet it had barely reacted.

Martel shot again. The demon jerked erect. Some crazy glow-in-the-dark liquid squirted out of both eyeholes. A line of it crossed Martel's stomach, burning through his shirt, burning his skin like hot grease. The demon crumpled.

Another one bent for the kill. Martel fired, seeing a drift of hope in this situation. The shot missed everything but the sky. Cursing, he aimed again and pulled the trigger.

Click!

The pistol was empty. Martel knew better than to dry-fire a weapon that was utterly, unalterably empty, as the firing pin can be damaged in some models. He threw it at the newest customer. It thunked against its leftmost tusk and plopped on the grass, goodbye and so long. How he ached for it.

The demon bent low.

Martel screamed.

11

Brayker heard it. In his very long life he had become used to a lot of things, things like hunger, thirst, loneliness, pain. But it was the screaming that ached the most, because whenever he heard it, he knew that it was his fault. Nobody ever invited a man like him into their lives. He snuck in the back door with lies and evasions, and invariably, every goddamned lousy time, people started dying. Screaming as they fought such unlikely foes, screaming as they died. He could never harden himself enough to bear it.

He turned and ran to the front door, hauled it open, and squinted into the dark. Someone was on the ground—Jeryline? Often male and female screams were indistinguishable; people rarely practiced beforehand just to achieve the right pitch. He had seen men as huge as bears squall like babies, had heard women and kids grunt and snuffle like lions as they fought and died. Whoever was thrashing on the ground surrounded by the Salesman's henchmen was howling like a French hen.

Brayker got the key out of its pouch. The orb had only a few drops left in it, maybe eight or nine. The time for refilling it was upon him, but as yet there was little hope for a proper donor. He turned it to the point where its tiny hole barely peeked at the world, then changed his mind. When the blood was gone, it would take his life with it.

He maneuvered the key so that the long extended point jutted out between his knuckles, and jogged across the porch to the lawn. With the key in his fist like a strange knife he stabbed the nearest demon in the spine. Cold black liquid jetted out as it fell away. It would not die from this treatment, Brayker knew quite well, but the key was better than any gun ever used on one, except a shotgun, which blew them into harmless chunks that squirmed and writhed and never quite died all the way.

One demon was bent over clawing at whoever was on the ground. Brayker rammed the key into the spot where an asshole might reside, if the demons were so equipped. The creature shot up, hissing like a cracked boiler, and sprang across the lawn into the gravel.

A foot drove itself into Brayker's right knee, causing a bright bolt of pain to rifle up his thigh. He gritted his teeth: that was no fleshy, rubbery foot; it was a boot. He slashed out at a demon and cut a huge trench through its hideous head. Gobbling, it staggered away.

Now Brayker could see well enough. The intrepid Deputy Martel was kicking and waving like a turtle on its back, a portrait of filth from the bottom of his boots to the tips of his hair. In their muddy sockets his eyes gleamed insanely. “Get up!” Brayker roared at him, stabbing the key into the side of a nearby demon’s bloated head. It squawked and fell over.

Martel was in a crazy trance of sorts as he kicked at nothing and flailed his arms, bellowing something about mommy, something about needing artillery for these sumbitches. Brayker bent and took hold of his hair, then twisted it as hard as if trying to open a jar with a stuck lid. Martel stiffened with a strangled groan. “You listen up,” Brayker growled in his ear. “Shut the fuck up, get the fuck up, and we’ll get the fuck out of here alive. Comprenday-vous?”

Martel blinked. Every cord in his neck was thick and tight. “Com-comprenday,” he groaned.

Brayker hauled him upright. One of the demons, till now unhurt, sprang at him. Brayker sidestepped and slit its belly open as it did. A mash of dark, unidentifiable guts flopped across the grass.

“Okay, go!” Brayker shouted.

Martel took a wobbly step, hesitated, then spun around. His feet skidded on the wet grass and he fell hard on his elbows. “There’s guns,” he panted. “One lost out here someplace. Another one in the cruiser.”

Brayker thought for a moment, his eyes jumping from place to place. More guns? If the basement could be sealed off, they wouldn’t need them. But that cat of Irene’s seemed to pop up everytime someone heaved it outside, which meant there was another way in, and another way out besides the trapdoor.

“You look around here,” he told Martel. “I’ll get the one in the car.”

“I want that key before I take one more step,” Martel said. “I saw what it can do.”

Brayker shook his head. “No way. Impossible.”

Martel aimed a shaking, muddy finger at his face. “I’m the law here,” he growled. “I run this show.”

Brayker eyed him coldly. “This key only works for me,” he said. “To you it’s just another piece of metal, won’t do a thing.”

“Hand it over, Brayker. I am an official of the county and the court.”

Brayker let out a short, apathetic chuckle, amazed all over again by the ruthless stupidity of the average Joe. “Go away,” he muttered, and turned.

A demon had crept up behind him and stood there, a gape-jawed,

one-eyed monstrosity with its arms poised overhead for the pounce. “Wrong guy,” Brayker said to it, and stepped to the side. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “My pal here tastes better.”

The demon grunted its thanks. Brayker walked away. Martel let out another unhappy whoop and began to thump and twist on the lawn again. At the car Brayker leaned inside, fetched up the shotgun while admiring the redecorating Martel had done to the car’s interior, and worked the pump. One shell sat already poised and anxious to fire. He turned and ambled toward the house again, where Martel was now encircled by three of the original four and not happy about it at all, by the tone of his voice. Brayker raised the key and plunged it into the back of a demon head. The two others jumped back as the first fell, eyeing the damage it did. Hissing, drooling, they backed away.

Brayker leaned over Martel. “Still wanna run this show?”

Martel clambered sullenly to his feet, ignoring him, walked off, and lurched up the steps. Brayker allowed himself a smile, which was rare, and wished, for a silly little moment, that Jeryline were here to see it.

He had not quite made it to the door when someone else screamed, this time inside the building, this time upstairs somewhere, and this time, as always, he could not tell who it was.

* * *

Jeryline heard it. Even down in the basement, her secret place where it was dry and cool and free from Irene’s dictatorial grip, she heard it, as if it was carried along the walls to the bricks of the foundation. Not two minutes ago she had heard Brayker’s voice as Cleo the cat revealed her hideaway, had heard the little trapdoor pulled away, had known that there no longer existed a haven for her. When Brayker suddenly vanished she had thought about climbing out, going someplace else, pretending to have been in the pantry or the bathroom the whole time, and in this way keep her secret. But no, as always in her life she had been found out, exposed, stripped of her privacy, so now she decided she would damn well sit here until they dragged her out kicking and screaming.

The nameless victim upstairs was giving fabulous lessons in the vocal arts. Jeryline perked up in spite of herself, concentrating on the noise, an involuntary wave of goose bumps crawling up her spine. Had the monsters gotten inside again? Was everybody dying up there?

Footsteps thumped, hard enough to loosen puffs of dust from the beams overhead. They sounded more like the tromping of people wearing shoes, not at all like the patter of oversized, floppy monster feet. She hesitated, drawing deeply on the cigarette she had used to stab Cleo when the stupid cat scared her, a cigarette that now tasted a

lot like burning hair.

More screams. *Inhuman* screams. She deliberated. Had Irene just found that the stove was not clean yet? Had Wally just seen Cordelia naked for the first time? Had Uncle Willie run out of booze, had that ding-dong deputy shot himself in the foot, had Roach just smelled his own armpit? Tune in tomorrow for another exciting episode of "Mission Inn-possible."

She decided to find some answers. Her hiding place had been violated, someone was screaming like a moron, her cigarette tasted like violin strings, and she had to go pee. She picked up the candle and stood, the tendons in the backs of her knees complaining slightly at being stretched again, and went to the crude little ladder. She dropped the cigarette in the dirt, and looked up. Bedlam was underway upstairs, perhaps the dying cries and last footsteps of Brayker's ridiculous demons. The trapdoor was in place again, which made her frown. Cleo was out, Brayker knew where this was, yet he had shut it again. In respect of her privacy? How about this: he had no idea she was down here. All he knew was that Cleo had been on top of the ladder to greet him. Perhaps the jig was not yet up.

She went up the ladder, put a hand above her head, and pushed the door up high enough to see, minding its noise. At floorboard level she saw only that the floor of Irene's mansion was slightly uneven and held areas of dust. At the distant stairway a set of human legs and feet thumped up and out of sight. No more screaming, though.

Jeryline let the candle fall into the dirt beside the ladder, straightened, and eased the trapdoor to the side. She had become too much of a pessimist, she thought, too ready to give up her secret place. With such screaming going on, everyone would expect her to follow the crowd upstairs. And if they asked where the hell she had been? Hiding somewhere, under the sink or in the linen closet. With all this craziness going on, who wouldn't?

It seemed plausible. She worked herself out of the rectangle, turned on her knees, and put the door back snugly where it belonged, breathing faster, suddenly desperate not to get caught in this act. When she rose up too fast, the back of her neck scraped against the lowest shelf, making her recoil while putting a whole row of Irene's preserves in motion like a set of freshly placed bowling pins. Grimacing, she crawled out and pushed the door shut before anything could crash to the floor.

Nothing did. She got to her feet and brushed a light film of sweat from her forehead, dusted her clothes, shook out her hair and finger-combed it back into place. It would be no surprise to her if she looked like walking dogshit, no sleep, no makeup, what could anybody

expect? At a hasty jog she crossed into Irene's absurd entertainment center, passed by the television, the front desk, got to the stairwell, and looked up.

Nothing, nobody, not a sound. She plodded up the steps, seeing at last that Irene was standing in the hallway, Roach was standing in the hallway, Brayker was standing in the hallway—everybody and their dog was clustered in the freaking hallway. She took the last step and waited, frowning, for someone to notice her.

Nobody did. She raised a hand, was about to say how-do, when two things caught her eye that erased the words from her mind.

Brayker was holding a sawed-off shotgun, looking grim and haunted. A shiny line of blood had begun to slide from under the door of Room One, Cordelia's room, her boudoir where many a man had traveled many a mile to partake of the old scuzzbucket's charms and delights.

Brayker tested the knob. "Back off," he hissed, handing out dirty looks. His eyes found Jeryline. They seemed to flare somehow, to change, though she could not tell if the reaction was anger or happiness or hatred.

"Back off, dammit," he said, and motioned with his head. "Jeryline, you come here with me. Take this." He dug into his clothes and produced the key, held it up for her to see. She frowned, confused, part of her mind still in the basement where life was slow and easy, and then went to him. "Take it," he said, and pressed it into her hand. "Cover me."

She folded her fingers over it, reluctant even to touch it. The glass ball only had a few ugly-looking smatters of blood clinging to the inside. The entire thing felt greasy and warm.

"I don't know how to use this," she said, making faces at it. "What am I supposed to do? Throw blood all over the place?"

He shook his head. "You'll know."

Before she could react, he twisted the doorknob and kicked the door open. The topmost hinge let out a groan as the jamb shattered there. He took a step inside. Everyone crowded closer.

"He said to back off," Jeryline heard herself snap at the others. To her surprise they did, giving ground so she could follow Brayker. Even Roach looked small and afraid. The deputy, that Martel guy, was a brown and green Gumby with the glint of permanent depression in his eyes. Irene was glowering at the damage to the door jamb. Uncle Willie had the glazed eyes of a diabetic needing insulin in a very bad way. What a crew, Jeryline thought dismally. What a small, unlikely crew to have assembled here in Wormwood for this dreadful night.

She stepped inside the room. There was a smell in the air, something electrical. Above that, a thin, salty odor like chicken blood. Brayker put his hand to the light switch.

“Damn,” she heard him whisper as soon as he clicked it on. She looked over his shoulder, the key held ready for whatever might come.

Cordelia was sitting in a chair by the window. The thin robe she wore while entertaining gentlemen callers was parted obscenely between the spread of her knees; her face looked as if it had been shoved into a vat of hot blue-green wax. Her eyes seemed to glow with a sullen bluish-red as she grinned hugely at Brayker, and a thick red line of blood oozed between her teeth to drip off her chin. Worst of all, though, worst of all, was Wally.

He was draped across her lap with his hands and feet touching the bloody floor, his face staring upside-down at the ceiling. In death his eyes had not closed. Large chunks of flesh had been bitten out of both cheeks. Jeryline clapped a hand over her mouth and turned, but not before she had seen Cordelia’s blue jaw hinge open; with her tongue she pushed a big white chunk of meat out to plop on Wally’s shredded shirt. A rind of skin on the chunk needed, ever so slightly, a shave.

Jeryline could not help it; she vomited a thick warm blot of supper into her hand. When she looked up, crazy with the need to drop the mess into a toilet and wash her hand, Brayker hoisted the shotgun to his shoulder, and fired.

Boom! In that instant Cordelia lifted Wally’s corpse up as a shield. Wally’s dead stomach exploded and a large clot of his innards splatted across her leering face. The knobs of his spine gleamed whitely inside the fresh hollow where his guts had been, while tattered ropes of meat and intestine dangled out of the hole like vines crawling out of a flowerpot. She stood in one lightning motion and heaved Wally’s body at Brayker. He staggered back against Jeryline, losing the shotgun. It bounced across the floor, clattering end-for-end while balls of smoke puffed comically out the barrel, and skittered under the bed. Jeryline crashed down on her butt, still able to hold her dripping hand away from herself like a falling drunk trying to save his beer, but losing a lot between her fingers. Brayker squirmed atop her, then rolled away.

Cordelia attacked. Her arms were wired with white streaks of veins beneath the blue skin, her face was gleeful and insane. Brayker tried to move aside but was still tangled in Jeryline’s feet and legs. Cordelia pounced on him and clamped both hands on his shoulders, ripping his shirt. Jeryline shrank away, not wanting to believe that Cordelia’s fingernails, which she always kept painted a slutty red, were now long yellow tiger-talons with little squares of fingernail polish still in place.

When she opened her mouth to bite Brayker her teeth were twisted yellow fangs. An image sprang into Jeryline's mind: the gleaming fossil teeth of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"The key!" Brayker howled as he fought and squirmed.

Jeryline rocked to her feet and looked stupidly at her hands. One was holding a thick pile of puke and the other held the key. At the right side of her vision, deputy Martel blurred across like a green and brown fish. He dropped to all fours, then flat onto his stomach, and wriggled under the bed.

"Jeryline," Brayker groaned while Cordelia champed and slavered, her fangs less than a foot above his face. "Use the key!"

She raised the hand that held the key. Brayker had said she would know how to use it. So okay, where were the divine instructions for the proper care and handling of an enormous key? At least with a handful of half-digested cube steaks and potatoes she had a good idea where to dispose of it.

The question lost its importance when the deputy wriggled out from under the bed with the shotgun in both hands. By now everyone from the hallway had jammed themselves into the doorway again and stood there awestruck. For a moment Jeryline had the sensation of being an exhibit at a zoo where people pointed and stared through the bars all day.

Martel was shaking with excitement as he rose to his feet. "Get her off of you!" he shouted to Brayker on the floor. "Gimme a clean shot!"

Brayker was too busy guarding his face and neck. Jeryline walked a few steps on her knees, circling Brayker and the evil thing that had been a whore named Cordelia, trying to figure out what to do. Martel shouted things at her, commanded her to move or get shot along with Cordelia, but Jeryline was waiting—perhaps in shock at having seen enough to make her puke, perhaps in the hope that the key really *could* be a powerful weapon in her untrained hands—was waiting for the words of God to command her to use it.

"Goddammit girl, *move!*" Martel howled as he pranced with the shotgun, and stood on one foot long enough to kick Jeryline in the face. Pain drove from her nose into her skull like two white-hot nails up the sinuses. Instinctively, with her eyes mashed shut and gushing tears, she hurled the handful of thick vomit at Martel. With her other hand she lashed out blindly and felt the key connect with something solid: Cordelia's body. Had to be. The key was wrenched from her hand as Cordelia jerked away in a sudden, huge twitch. She screamed as if being dropped feet first into a leaf mulcher, Jeryline's mental epitome of pain and the lousiest way to die.

Martel made coughing noises. Jeryline was able to squinch her eyes

open a bit. He was beside the bed pawing at his face—ook, the whole evening's menu was represented there. His muddy boots skidded in a patch of blood and Jeryline-juice, and he boomeranged into the air, all elbows and angles suddenly, and thudded disjointedly down on his back. Again the shotgun clattered away.

"This is bullshit," she heard Cordelia's exboyfriend Roach complain. He strutted in and bent for the shotgun, kicking Martel out of the way. Jeryline snapped her eyes over to Cordelia: the key was stuck between her shoulder blades. She had jerked up to her knees and was straining to grasp it, her bony hands clawing, her flabby old-woman's arms jiggling as she tried to reach the most unreachable spot on the human body. Her face was a ghastly field of blue and green twisted in a contortion of agony.

"Yeah?" Roach suddenly bellowed, making Jeryline cringe away. "You thought you could fuck up *my* reputation in this town?"

She looked up at Roach. He was grinning and sweating.

"My reputation? *Mine?* Well, here's what I say to that!"

He fired. The noise was thunder and hate in one loud package. Cordelia's head burst into a crimson mist while shards of her skull chopped jagged, smoking holes into the opposite wall.

Brayker got to his feet. His face was crisscrossed with scratches, beady with sweat. "I never learn," he panted, pressing a hand to his face. "Kill first, ask questions later." He gave Jeryline a hand as she struggled to stand. Something between his feet caught his attention, and she looked down when her balance was okay.

One of Cordelia's eyeballs was spinning to a lazy stop in a streak of reddish fluid on the floor. Small pink muscles jutted out in a ring around it like tattered wings, the torn remnants of its moorings to the eyesockets of her head. As Jeryline watched in horror, Brayker put his foot over it, ready to crush it, she guessed, like a bug.

"Don't make me puke again," she groaned.

"Then don't look at her body," he responded.

She looked over to what remained of the woman known to her only as Cordelia no-last-name, the whore in Room One who had wild dreams of true love coming her way, and a belief that some men really did ride on white horses and wear shining armor. She had been blown over onto her back by the blast, splayed on the floor with her neck ending in a sloppy perforation job. For Jeryline it was like seeing standard special effects in a movie, yet was grotesque in this stark reality.

Jeryline glanced up to Brayker. "I didn't puke," she said.

His face was tired and drawn. "Look again. Forget what's gone. See

what's left. Then you'll understand more."

She looked, distantly thinking that in France about now, Parisians were enduring morning's rush-hour traffic, and wouldn't it be grand to be there instead of here among all this death?

She shoved the fantasy aside. By erecting a mental shield she was able to focus only on Cordelia's body and forget the missing head. It seemed at first that there lay only the corpse of a woman wearing a sheer blue robe that was splayed open to reveal her entire naked, blue body. Even though Jeryline was no friend of Cordelia's, the woman deserved some dignity, especially now that the entire remaining crew of the Mission Inn was tromping in.

She was about to avert her gaze when Cordelia's body began to spasm. Her legs drew up so that her knees were off the floor. Her pelvis began to thrust up and down while the cellulite of her thighs quivered and dimpled. Her breasts heaved with the movement. The deflated tube of her neck began to flop back and forth as if she were alive and whole again, plying her trade.

Jeryline twisted her head away. "You son of a bitch," she hissed at Brayker. "You knew what was coming."

He eyed her levelly. "And now you know. Cordelia's soul belongs to the underworld until we can release her from the Salesman's lies. And the key to that is in the eyes, *always* in the eyes."

He looked down. His foot in its weary old shoe was still poised over Cordelia's remaining eyeball. Jeryline felt sure the other had been obliterated in the shotgun blast, but that didn't seem to have been enough.

Brayker smashed the eye with a grunt of effort. The thin white fluid Jeryline had already seen coming out of the demons squirted in a solid line to Cordelia's dresser, splattering it. The varnish began to sizzle.

Cordelia's straining body relaxed and was still.

Brayker reached a hand to Jeryline's face and gently lifted her chin. "Death is often a kinder master than life," he said. "Even a death as awful as this."

She took a great breath, confused, troubled, unwilling, but not quite ready to hide away again, at least not yet. "Hey, Brayker?" she said when he seemed likely to turn away. "Brayker?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Hum?"

"You said I'd know what to do with the key. Now I don't even know where it is."

He thought for a bit, then rolled his shoulders. "Judging from my experience, I usually find it in the last place I put it."

"So all that stuff about my destiny, our destiny—it was a crock of

shit, right?"

He drew back and studied her face. "If you think it was, then I guess it was," he said. "Can you be comfortable with that?"

She opened her mouth to say yes, she was more than just comfortable, she was *relieved* to no longer be a participant in whatever weird kind of show this was, that her status as an observer from now on was just fine; instead she felt hungry to know more about the whole crazy thing, the Salesman, the demons, the key, Brayker. Especially Brayker.

"Ask me later," she said, drawing close. The pandemonium around them, orchestrated by Roach and Martel and Irene and Uncle Willie as they squawked and squalled their shocked amazement to each other, was too boisterous to bear right now. Jeryline scrubbed a hand on her pants and cupped it around Brayker's ear. "We need to talk, just you and me. Alone."

She withdrew her hand. "Get the key first," he said, and motioned toward the headless corpse. "The last place you put it was in Cordelia's back."

Jeryline started. How could she have forgotten that? It was not every day you stabbed an acquaintance to death—or *nearly* to death.

"Don't worry," Brayker said. "It's part of the Salesman's power. If you don't keep the key on you all the time, you tend to forget."

She frowned at this bit of news. "So you mean that *you* could toss the key away and forget all about it?"

He nodded, dabbing the shallow cuts on his face with a sleeve.

"So why not just get rid of it, then? Get out of all this craziness, forget it ever happened. Could you?"

"I could," he said. "But I can't."

She raised an eyebrow. "Would the Salesman leave you alone then?"

He nodded.

"So do it. Give him the damn thing."

He lowered his head and was silent for a moment. Deputy Martel passed behind him and gave Jeryline a look that indicated many things, top of the list being a big no-thanks for having slung a handful of warm puke into his face.

Brayker looked up, then held his right palm out for her to see.

"I know," she said. "You've got a strange tattoo. So?"

He took her elbow and guided her into the hallway, and on down the stairs. Again he held his open hand to her. "See the stars?"

"Yeah. Seven stars in a nice little circle, with a bunch of curlicues

and designs inside it."

"That's the point," he said. "When all seven stars form a perfect circle, the Salesman is just a step away from getting all seven keys."

Her eyes widened. "You're saying your tattoo can move? And that there are six other keys? This just gets weirder and weirder."

"Yes on both of those. And the Salesman is here to collect the last key."

"Moving tattoos," Jeryline groaned as she tottered to the front desk and leaned against it. "Keys with a ball of blood built in, Wally dead, Cordelia turned into a vampire—"

Brayker was shaking his head. "Not a vampire."

Jeryline straightened. "Then what?" she nearly shouted. "What do you call a woman that eats her new boyfriend's face? A man-eating tiger? The Hungry Whore from Hell? Let's make a movie about it, Mr. Brayker. Let's call up the bigwigs from the nearest monster movie and tell them we have a fabulous idea for another one, a movie about a tattoo and a key and a guy who calls himself a Salesman. We'll even star in it, Mr. Brayker. You will play Rhett Butler and I will be Scarlett O'Hara. Have you got a problem with that?"

He eyed her fiercely. "Blowing your stack won't change things, Miss Jeryline. If the Salesman gets the key this time, there will be nothing left at all except the Salesman and his friends. Whether you like it or not, what we do here, on this night, will either save the universe or doom it."

She brayed out a short, bitter laugh. "So now we're fighting for the whole freaking *universe?* In a two-bit desert town nobody ever heard of?"

"That's just the way it happened to work out this time," Brayker said. "Last time it was in New York City. Before that, a four-hut Eskimo camp in Alaska. Before that, long before that, I fought him in France."

Jeryline took a long breath to steady herself. Why was she mad at him so suddenly? Every time she got fed up with this madness, she turned on him. Just like last time, she was mad because he had entered her life uninvited and unwelcome, and had turned it upside down.

She put her hands tiredly to her face, rubbing her eyes. The smell of vomit jumped off one of them and crawled into her nose. "Christ," she said, dropping her hands, "I've got to use the little girls' room and wash up."

"You'll be safe," he said. "Everything is sealed except the basement."

She stopped in mid-step. “What basement?”

Brayker pointed. “There’s a trapdoor in that closet. We need to go down, scope it out. The cat keeps showing up, so there’s at least one opening leading into the basement, and one leading up here.”

“I’ll be darned,” she said in casual tones. “A basement. I wonder if Irene knows.”

Brayker shrugged. “She’ll know soon enough. I’ll be back down in a minute, and we’ll get started.”

Jeryline felt very crafty now. “Going to form a search party of sorts?” she asked blithely, as if there existed not the slightest concern that a basement was beneath her feet or not.

He turned long enough to give a quick hint of a smile. “Nope. I’m going back up to get the key.”

“Key?” She pondered a bit before realization struck. “The key,” she moaned. “I forgot about it again.”

“Practice makes it easier,” Brayker said, and went up the stairs. Jeryline thought, but could not be sure, that under his breath he added another line: *And you will have years to practice it.*

She scowled, then flapped a hand toward his back as he went up. Phooey on the guy. When this night was over, she was going to jump parole and get the hell out of Wormwood, be a fugitive from justice, and live the life of a hunted, haunted criminal. Wouldn’t that be romantic?

She rolled her eyes at her own inanity, and crossed past the kitchen to get to the downstairs bathroom, which was clean as a dinner plate, as sanitary as Lysol could ever make it, because it was cleaned daily by the resident slave.

At the door she stopped, suddenly puzzled by something. She pressed a finger to her forehead, concentrating. Was it a memory that had intruded on her thoughts? Had she seen something in passing that deserved a closer look?

She stepped back from the bathroom door, wondering. Was this *déjà vu?* Or was there something in the bathroom that her ESP, if she had any, was warning her to avoid?

She scrubbed her cleanest hand down her face. She was tired, she’d just finished puking upstairs, the world was wacko to the bone, and she had every right to gray out once in a while.

She stepped back to the door again, and then she knew. There was a small wooden sign screwed to it that had said, until now, *Employees Only*. She stared at the words, her smelly hand forgotten, everything forgotten but the small wood-burned letters that leaped out at her with a new message: LITTLE GHOULS ROOM.

Her heart began to pound harder in her chest. Little ghouls room? Wasn't that supposed to be Little Girls Room? But even worse, *Why had somebody gone to the trouble to change the sign in the first place?*

She felt reality begin to fracture. The Salesman, the demons—Brayker was right. The universe was coming apart at the seams . . .

Author's Interlude

by
T. C. Keeper

Just between me and you, boys and ghouls, I think grumpy old Jeryline needs to look on the bright side. So far Sheriff Tupper is cooling his heels (and all the rest of him) on the floor nearby, Cordelia's mind is elsewhere, and annoying little Wally just cheeked *out of the boarding house forever. Also, the Salesman hasn't shown his face, or his newest set of clothes, for quite some time now. But do you suppose she's happy? Do you suppose she's grateful for all the things I've done as I write about her?*

Not one bit. The Famous Dead Writer's Course *warns about letting your characters get out of control, but the Dead Writers never ran up against a woman like Jeryline. Or a man like Brayker. Or anyone else in the book. In fact, neither have I!*

It keeps me wondering where I ever dug up such characters.

12

Uncle Willie, who as a young man went by the name Wallace Pickerford Gimley and was a genteel and respectable investor in the precious metal called silver, wanted, on this scary, windblown night, to know only one thing:

Why the fuck did the whole crew have to be in the basement?

Brayker had led the way by unplugging the trapdoor from its nearly invisible moorings and descending the ladder there. Irene had followed, stunned to learn that her property had more property than she'd thought. Then went that doofy deputy named Marshall or Manfred or Mickey Mouse, something with the letter M involved. Roach, a bit deflated at having blown his former lover's head off, tromped on down behind the deputy with the shotgun in one hand. Willie had shrugged to himself, thinking there might be an ancient bottle of hooch below, and followed the pack. Jeryline, freshly washed up and looking young and pretty, came down last. Willie knew that her thoughts were miles away, though, because when he accidentally stepped on her foot in the dark, she squeaked out an apology, instead of vice-versa, and Jeryline was not the type of girl to forgive easy.

So here they all stood in a huddle while Brayker, having commandeered the only flashlight Willie had been able to find before all the screaming started, inspected the old, cobwebby walls for holes. Though the Mission Inn seemed stable enough upstairs, seeing these crumbling old foundation bricks made Uncle Willie wonder if the walls might be caving in soon. Down here, things seemed as old and rickety as his own bad self.

Irene grumbled something about having bought this place thinking it sat on a slab, or at least cement blocks. Roach, chugging out body odor like a human diesel engine, stubbed his toe on something and let out a yelp that echoed and was gone. Brayker turned and shined the big orange flashlight: an old wooden yoke that had once held a team of oxen together, its leather straps and reins crumbled and rotten now.

"Coulda broke my neck," Roach grunted. "Then I could sue."

Irene, just a shadow behind Brayker's light, snorted. "You sue me and I'll nail your balls to the back of your head, dumbass."

Roach let the subject drop. Jeryline appeared out of the darkness to Willie's left and snaked an arm through the crook of his elbow like a bride fixing to march down the aisle. Willie turned eighteen shades of

red, glad no one could tell in such weak light, and patted her hand.

"This wall's intact," Brayker announced. He turned, looking suddenly surprised to see such an audience gathered in the dark for him. "Doesn't anyone else have a flashlight? Irene? Any more of these?"

"My boarders go to bed at a decent hour," she blared. "There's a nightlight in the bathroom, and that's all a body needs."

He shined his flashlight into the group, making Willie and Jeryline shield their eyes. "Anybody?" Brayker asked. "We've got to find the holes down here, seal them up."

Irene piped up again. "I got a few dinner candles stuck someplace upstairs. Use them only at Thanksgiving dinner, though, and Christmas."

"There's two flashlights in the cruiser," Martel grunted unhappily.

Brayker pursed his lips, deliberating hard enough that Willie could almost hear the cogs and cams spinning in his brain, then shook his head. "One flashlight will do us." He trained the light back onto the wall, forming hills and valleys of shadow across the bricks. "We find the holes, seal them, and sweat out the rest of the night. Morning comes, it's over, it will all seem like a bad dream."

He moved on. A likely hole near the floor turned out to be a trick of the light when he knelt by it. Uncle Willie felt Jeryline's hand slowly tighten on his forearm as Brayker moved. Presently Brayker stopped again, and knelt. He had discovered a crack of sorts, and began probing it with his fingers. A severely crumpled red pack of Chesterfields plopped onto the dirt floor.

"Probably older than time itself," he murmured, and cast a quick glance at Willie and Jeryline before moving on. The shadows thrown by his flashlight changed somehow, and as Willie shuffled along with the crowd he sensed the presence of something drawing close, something large and possibly scary.

"This," Brayker said, "is *definitely* older than time. Take a look."

They followed the beam of the flashlight as he let it follow the contours of the biggest, fattest furnace Willie had ever been privileged to see. The burning tank of the old coal-eater was a squat round thing as big as a UFO. Huge sheet-metal arms kinked out from it in all upward directions: a gigantic, upside-down octopus coated with decades of dust. Irene let out a humorless ha-ha.

"I'm glad the upstairs furnace is propane gas," she twittered. "This old beast would cost me a hundred dollars a day, and just look at it!"

Brayker jerked the beam of light away from the furnace and directed it farther on. "Furnaces like this need a coal-room nearby," he

said. “Coal-rooms have an opening for the truck to dump through.”

He walked again. Jeryline disengaged herself from Willie after giving his forearm another squeeze. Buggy thoughts of courting and marriage buzzed through his head, but he chased them away with a mental can of Off, and concentrated on the real issue here: finding enough booze to keep him alive through the night.

“Should be around this corner,” he heard Brayker say. “Around this one, and . . . bingo.”

Uncle Willie did not feel much like applauding. He followed the others into the room Brayker had discovered in all of this crust and must and dust that was Irene’s new basement. There were indeed a few fist-size chunks of coal scattered in the dirt. A splintered old shovel was propped against one wall, having waited for umpteen years to be found and put to use again. Willie felt a fondness for it, poor old thing everyone had forgotten. There was indeed a big square opening high up on the wall, but it had been messily cemented over.

“Right here,” Brayker said as he went into a squat. “I knew there had to be a hole here someplace.” He hunkered down for a look. For reasons known only to rats and cats, a messy little hollow existed in the bricks there. Brayker dropped to his chest and aimed the flashlight over his ear to see inside, ruining Willie’s view, but who in the world really gave a shit?

Brayker shifted. “Looks like a mineshaft. Long and deep.” The hole swallowed most of his voice. “Anybody know anything about mining around here? Where the shafts usually exit?”

No one responded. Irene moved to Uncle Willie and gave him a jab in the ribs with her elbow. “You keep blowing off about being an expert on silver,” she said. “Know anything about the mines?”

He took a breath, touched his bearded chin. He had no memory whatsoever of ever having mentioned the things of his past to her. “I used to know the maps, all of them,” he offered. “This whole town was built above the old mines, hundreds of them. But years have passed, and I am older.”

Brayker got up on his knees and parked the flashlight on the floor. “Doesn’t matter anyway,” he said, and pulled the key from its pouch. “I’ll seal it. That’s all I can do.”

Roach decided to come alive again, right next to Willie’s ear. “I’m for busting that hole bigger and crawling the fuck out of here. Irene, you got a sledgehammer?”

“Nope,” she said. “But I’ve got a pickax.”

Roach raised a triumphant fist. “This party,” he announced, “is just about officially over. Brayker, you can keep that key or ram it up your

ass, nobody cares which. We are outta here."

Brayker stood up fully. "Nobody's going anywhere," he said. "We found this opening, and our friends outside probably have too. As soon as we pop up at the end of the tunnel, they'll be there."

Roach stepped closer to him. "You know what?" he said hotly. "I have had it with you telling us what to do. If we feel like carving the hole out bigger, we will. And if we feel like breaking out through the mines, we'll do that, too."

Roach looked from shadowed face to shadowed face, his lips curled in a classic dictator's leer. Willie had the distinct feeling that if that old Italian fiend Mussolini had a cousin hiding in America, Roach was it.

"Right?" Roach crowed.

Silence. Irene let out a short cough. Roach's eyes seized upon her as if she had just snapped out a Fascist salute. "Thank you," he said. "And since I speak for us all, we see nothing wrong with giving the freaky guy everything he wants, cause all he wants is that stupid antique that's probably his in the first place."

Again he grandstanded, propping the shotgun on his shoulder. "Anybody got a problem with that? Brayker?"

Brayker looked up to the beams overhead, where the shadows were starkly lit into thick bands of white and black, adorned with tendrils of cobwebs. "You can go wherever you want to go," he said slowly. "Any route out of this house is certain death."

"So you say," Roach grunted.

Brayker nodded. "So I say. And I have had decades of experience in this. I have seen people die from smaller mistakes."

"Fine, then," Roach said. "So that none of us inexperienced fools winds up dying, give me that key. I'll hand it to the gentleman outside, if he's still around, and we can forget this night ever happened."

Brayker shook his head almost sadly. "And forget what the Salesman did to Sheriff Tupper? Forget what he did to Cordelia and Wally? Forget what he's really here for?"

"Aha!" Roach beamed out a revolting kind of sneer/smile that made Uncle Willie want to kill him on the spot. Not because Roach had bad intentions, though; it was because the greasy little rat looked so damn smug. Uncle Willie had been eighty-sixed out of the Eureka Cafe many a time while soliciting culinary handouts from the patrons, and Roach was always willing to help in the eviction. "So now the truth comes out," Roach said. "Finally, finally, we are going to hear, from Mr. Brayker's own two lips, exactly what in the hell is going on."

Brayker bent and picked up the boxy old flashlight. “Jeryline,” he said, making motions with it, “mind holding this while I seal the hole?”

She touched her throat, looked at the others, then took an uncertain step toward him. Roach jumped in her way, a leaping black scarecrow in the dark. “Jeryline ain’t going to be doing that right now,” he said. “It’s the key in that pouch she’ll be getting, won’t you, Jerry?”

She hesitated, and backed up a step, which Uncle Willie read clearly as: *Leave me out of this, Bozo.*

Roach spun to face Brayker. Brayker aimed the shaft of light smack into his face, but Roach didn’t even blink. Uncle Willie sensed a big, messy confrontation coming up; it was a skill every man develops when hanging out in bars a lot. So long as people were in the stage of just yelling at each other, everything was cool. It was when things got quiet that you had to pick up your drink and move out of the way, or lose it and maybe a tooth—or catch a load of buckshot—in the process.

“I outweigh you by thirty pounds,” Roach growled, brandishing the gun and helping Willie breathe a little easier as he looked around for a safer spot: the talking wasn’t over yet. “And I got a shotgun and fifteen years on your age, you old shit.”

Willie, despite his dangerous proximity to being sober enough to die, still cared enough to laugh out loud. If Brayker was an old shit, what the hell was everybody’s favorite uncle, Uncle Willie? Father Time himself? If Willie were forty years younger, by God, he would give this Roach fellow here a lesson in civility, do him some great harm, but for one minor thing.

Even forty years ago, Willie didn’t have enough meat on his skinny bones to punch his way out of a paper bag.

Brayker clicked the flashlight off. Roach’s voice piped up immediately: “You pile of chicken shit! Turn that back on.”

A weak green light glowed feebly to life near Brayker, causing Willie’s face to crease into an instant frown. That flashlight hadn’t put out green light before. Maybe it was one of those military deals with colored filters.

The glow grew strong enough to paint Roach’s face an unhealthy lemon-lime. Brayker appeared as a black silhouette. Willie realized that the light was coming from one of Brayker’s hands, which he was holding up at the level of his head as if to wave a casual bye-bye. This was an even better display than Willie had seen down at the old gas station when the two of them collided: this time Brayker’s feeble glow-in-the-dark tattoo was chasing the darkness before it.

“Seven stars,” Brayker rasped, as if his voice had become full of dust

and weariness. “Seven stars in a perfect circle. It doesn’t happen very often.”

He flashed his hand across his audience, piercing Willie’s eyes with seven visual streaks. The basement’s lumpy floor seemed to pitch and heave as Brayker displayed the lantern of his hand, but it was only the basement’s shadows snaking about as if looking for more comfortable positions after so many years in darkness.

“It still don’t mean shit to me,” Roach said. “Irene, go get that pickax of yours. We’ll smash this wall totally plumb down.”

Strangely, Irene bobbed her head in wordless compliance, an unexpected event for a woman of her temperament, Willie knew. She took a dazed step toward the direction of the ladder, tottered to a stop, then spun around.

“Get it your goddamned self, you lazy jerk!”

Willie ceased being puzzled; at least one person here was back to normal. Roach huffed and puffed with indignation, then lumbered off to do as told.

Jeryline moved to take the flashlight from Brayker, whose tattooed hand was losing brilliance, but he shook his head. He snapped his hand open and closed and the green light was gone. He then clicked the flashlight on. “No sense wasting a drop of the blood,” he muttered. “The seal will be broken as soon as Roach starts pecking at it.”

Martel wandered away while drying pieces of mud fell off his clothes, adding dirt to this dirt, which had not seen daylight since the turn of the century or before, by Willie’s humble estimation. He seemed to recall, but could never be sure, that before this former church was built atop the rickety foundation, this had been a gambling hall of some sort, in which many a man met his death for dealing from the bottom of the deck. Could be, then, that on top of all its other woes, the Mission Inn might well be haunted.

Uncle Willie dazedly closed his eyes, rocking on his feet. Who cared about ghosts with all these demons popping up? His alcohol-starved brain was producing crazy thoughts by the bucketful. He opened his eyes and in the simple, stark light saw a man-size bottle of Jack Daniel’s whiskey with no cap on top.

This was bad news. The DTs were starting to set in and could only be halted by the liberal administration of booze. He licked his lips, his eyes darting nervously over to the dark shape that was Irene. He edged toward her, and cleared his throat. “Say, uh, Miss Irene,” he began haltingly, wishing he had worn a hat so he could wring it between his hands in a gesture of humble despair, “I’m starting to get in a pretty bad way, what with not having had a—”

“Kitchen, under the sink,” she said tonelessly, without even turning

to look at him. "Bottle of vodka, almost full. Bring two glasses."

Willie nearly dropped to his knees. "Madam," he uttered, "you are a saint among womankind."

Now she turned. "Better head out before I come back to my senses."

He turned and bolted into the dark, ran face first into the monstrous furnace, thudded down on his back like a fallen soldier, and sprang up again. His nose was bleeding and both eyes would be black before the hour was up, but he did not care. Again he bolted, re-aiming himself, and tripped over the oxen yoke. He went down face first and cracked his mouth on some protruding metal thing, a rusty bolt, maybe. He jumped up and spat out a tooth, one that had been troubling him lately anyhow. He bolted once more and ran into Deputy Martel who was ambling through the dark. Both went sprawling. Martel cursed him. Willie did not care. He got to his feet and began to search wildly for the ladder. Eventually he located a square of light shining from upstairs, guiding him with its dusty beam. He charged up the ladder, snapping off two of its brittle wooden rungs. Finally aboveboard, he bolted for the kitchen. His hands parted the metal bat-wing doors just as Roach was coming out. *Kang!* He dropped like a sack of bones. Roach stepped over him, laughing.

Willie crawled the last few steps to the sink, located the bottle, and stuck it in his mouth.

Something made him turn. Just outside the smashed doorway stood the Salesman, grinning. He was dressed in a tuxedo. Two gorgeous young blondes in thong bikinis were affixed to him. All three held huge, Mr. Ed-sized martini glasses. The olives were as big as softballs, gloriously green, stuffed with red pimento.

Willie lowered the bottle, his eyes bugging.

"The real party's out here, Mr. Gimley," the Salesman said. "And more booze and girls than I can handle." A load of pink and yellow confetti shot out of the dark, along with spangles and sequins. They floated down to drape the three. Music played outside; somewhere, women laughed. The girls giggled.

Willie pressed a shaking hand to his mouth. These DTs were the worst ones yet, full-color hallucinations, both in his eyes and in his ears.

The Salesman beckoned. "Do join us," he said. "We're all waiting for you."

Willie screwed the bottle back between his lips, slammed his eyes shut, and sucked on it like a frightened baby going after a bottle of warm milk.

"You'll come, eventually," the Salesman said without malice.

“Nobody *ever* misses one of *my* parties.”

Willie drank and drank.

The Salesman laughed, long and loud.

Willie drank.

13

It took Roach and Martel only ten minutes to smash the little hole in the wall into a crater that even Irene, being big-boned and full-figured, could wriggle through. Jeryline had been hanging in the background watching the two work, still immensely troubled by what she had seen on the door of the bathroom. So far the Salesman had not approached her in any personal way, had not singled her out for the kind of treatment he had given Cordelia. But that thing with the bathroom door, that little ghouls room—how much power did the man have? If he could change her perceptions of reality, he possessed all the ammunition he needed to seek her out and destroy her. But the oddest thing was that after she'd used the restroom and come back out, the sign simply said *Employees Only* again. So had she imagined the whole thing? Or was the Salesman capable of driving her slowly insane?

Roach, glistening with sweat and enveloped in a fog of locker-room stench, tossed the pickax aside and lifted up the belly of his T-shirt to mop his forehead. Martel dusted his hands, seeming not quite as winded as Roach.

"Okay, where's Willie?" he asked, swiveling his head, squinting through the dust. "He's supposed to be the mining expert."

Irene had a Kleenex pressed to her nose. "I sent him up to the kitchen for a bottle of vodka, and that's all it took. Guess I got stupid and started feeling sorry for the bum."

"I'll go fetch the old dude," Martel said, and coughed. He worked his jaw and spat on the ground, ground it into the dirt with the toe of one boot, then plodded away.

Jeryline's stomach performed a slow, greasy roll, and she moved to where Brayker stood idly holding the flashlight. "Changed your mind about getting out through the mines?" she asked him.

He jerked his shoulders. "If you don't all get killed in there you'll wind up like Cordelia, so I might as well be on hand to end it."

"End it?"

He glanced wearily at her. "Kill you. When you belong to the Salesman, you are my enemy. I pop you with a drop of blood, you die. And I live on to guard the key."

"Oh, the blood," she said. "Like you still have a lot of it."

"It will do," he said.

"Whose blood is it, anyway?" she asked. "Yours?"

He was silent for a time. Then: "Most of it belongs to a man named Harrison."

"Harrison? Who the hell is that?"

"Just a man I knew."

"A wonderful explanation, Brayker. Who else donated to the cause?"

"Other men," he said. "And women, too."

"Sounds like Red Cross work, collecting blood. Whose idea was it? Dracula's?"

He didn't smile. "Not funny."

"Who, then? How did it all start? And when?"

He drew himself up taller, eyeing her. "I'm not sure you're ready to hear it yet."

"What, I have to be older? It can't be told to a minor? Dirty words? The sale of alcohol involved? Violence and nudity?"

He seemed to want to smile, but the effort died before his lips got the message; the whole effect was visible only in his eyes. "I'd rather tell you in private," he said quietly. "It's a fairly long story."

Around the corner of the coal room, distantly, the ladder creaked and groaned. Presently Martel appeared practically carrying Uncle Willie, who was glassy-eyed and mumbling. "The wierdest thing," Martel said, letting him fall. Dust puffed up in a cloud. "In the kitchen, there's confetti hanging through the outside door, some spangly things all over the floor. Guess Willie had himself one hell of a party."

Brayker tensed. He put the flashlight on the floor, looking all kinds of strange. As Jeryline watched, baffled, he pulled the key from its pouch and stalked over to where Willie lay moaning in the dirt. In a swift movement he bent and touched it to Willie's forehead, nervously ready to spring back. Aha, Jeryline thought. The old touch-and-run monster test.

"He's clean," Brayker said, straightening. He stuffed it away and readjusted his shirt.

Roach had reclaimed his shotgun. "Screw the old bastard," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here." He stooped and peered through the hole. "Black as a coon's asshole. Brayker, did I hear you say you was coming or not?"

"Coming," Brayker said.

Roach swept an arm. "You first, Kee-mo-sobbee. You've got the magic key."

Jeryline handed Brayker the flashlight. “And you’ve got the magic shotgun,” he said to Roach.

Willie came alive and began the slow process of getting to his feet. “Barberashykl,” he informed everyone with cross-eyed dignity. “Revebslip. Hoo-hah.”

Roach went to him. “See the hole in the wall, Unkie? Can you walk your ass to it?”

“Peesul,” Willie said. “Peesul cake.”

Irene stomped over behind Roach, looking like a large walking fish in her lime-green pantsuit, and kicked him squarely in the butt. “Lay off the man,” she brayed. “He was fighting pink elephants while the best half of you was drying up on your mama’s bedsheet.”

He whirled. “Fuck you, you old bag of shit,” he snarled.

“You don’t have the pecker for it,” she shouted back.

“Do too!”

“Good.” Irene put on a great, fake smile. “Prove your courage by going into the mineshaft first, big shot.”

“I will!” he howled. “Just watch me!”

He marched to the hole, dropped to his knees, and crawled through, his dirty black shoes scraping and clunking. “Did it,” his muffled voice came back. “Who’s next?”

“I guess we are,” Martel said, and pointed Uncle Willie in the right direction. “Give us a minute.”

Jeryline leaned toward Brayker. “Looks like Irene has a soft spot for old Willie,” she said softly.

“Bad times can bring two things out of people,” he replied. “Their natural goodness or their natural badness.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Brayker the philosopher,” she said, her voice tainted with friendly sarcasm. “You seem wise beyond your years.”

“And what a pile of years they are,” he said and fell silent, staring down at the thick white beam of the flashlight and the currents of dust moving through it. She wondered if she had hit a sensitive nerve, then gave a mental *big deal!* He had acted like a jerk when they first met not too many hours ago, so who cared if she had somehow hurt his feelings?

He raised his head suddenly. “Shall we go?”

Irene’s green fanny was disappearing into the blackness at the other side of the hole. Jeryline crawled through, then Brayker. He stood and aimed the flashlight around.

“Old,” Jeryline breathed. “Wow.”

The mineshaft had been cut just deep enough to stand in. Despite the parched earth overhead, these rocky walls were damp in spots, hairy with spiderwebs whose owners had died and shriveled in their own homes before Jeryline was born. Crusty and orange with rust, a narrow pram track cut down the middle of the floor. The mossy smell of stagnant water hung in the air. It seemed obvious, or at least plausible, that the miners had cut this shaft through to the foundation of the building and said *whoops* after making the little hole and looking through. Or, of course, a lot of years' worth of rats could have gnawed their way in. As if any of that mattered anymore.

"I need the light up here," Roach said. His voice seemed to boom out, rebounded four or five times in a creepy, deepening echo, and was gone. "Please," he said more softly.

Brayker touched Jeryline's elbow and made motions for her to follow, if she wanted. Consternation welled up in her. Half of the time this guy was a moody loner, the other half a courteous Boy Scout. If he would just give away that stupid key they could both leave tonight, hitchhike out of her parole jurisdiction, start real lives. But no, she had already offered him that, and he had chosen to keep the key. Fine. If this mineshaft led to the world above, she would do her hitchhiking all alone.

Brayker took the lead with Roach while she hung back in the company of Irene and Willie and Deputy Martel. The sights and sounds of this tunnel, the damp smell in the air and the harshly cutting beam of light, reminded her, in a strange way, of the women's prison in Colorado at night, especially in the solitary block where all the stink and the wetness sank down from the prison above, and the guards raked the bars with their flashlights when they got bored.

"Fork in the road," Roach sang out. Echoes replied as everyone came to a stop. "Old man, do your thing."

Martel stepped forward, supporting Willie. "Can you think straight?" he asked him. "Does any of this look familiar?"

Brayker waved a hand indicating time-out. "I don't think he's ever been down here," he said. "He was an investor, knew all the maps."

Roach poked the barrel of the shotgun against the tunnel's floor and leaned his weight on it. "Oh, this is just swell," he said. "The drunk leading the blind."

Brayker looked over to him. "Ready to call this off? Go back and wait for morning?"

"No way." Roach smacked the barrel with the side of his foot; the shotgun spun around quite professionally, and he parked it on his shoulder, ready to march. "American veteran, National Guard," he said. "Suck on that."

"To the left is north," Willie slurred. "Feeder line to the main, no lode, no vein, no nothing. Lost my ass."

Irene frowned. "What?"

Martel shook Willie. "Which direction leads to the surface, old man? Left or right?"

"That-there is the south spur, takes you up like an escalator. Unless we're headed south, which would make it . . ." His eyes opened and shut in slow motion. "Where in the hell?"

Roach made a noise approximating the blowing of a nose. "Toss that old fucker back through the hole," he grumbled. "I think the shaft on the left angles up. Brayker?"

Brayker shook his head in the same slow motion Willie had used. "I have no idea. Besides, this is your parade."

Roach swallowed. "I know, I know. We'll go left, fifty percent chance, what the heck. We can always come back."

"Until we take another two or three forks after that," Irene said. "That's how scuba divers die in underwater caves, they get all lost. We ought to leave some kind of trail."

"Fresh out of road flares and bread crumbs," Roach said.

Irene smiled sweetly. "We can always follow the trail of your fleas."

"We'll try the left," Brayker said. "At least for a minute or two."

They looked at each other, nodded mutual consent, and walked on. Jeryline lagged behind, mulling over what Irene had said about scuba divers. Was it possible to get *that* damned lost down here? To die of thirst, maybe cannibalize each other? No, no way. She was just tweaking a little.

At the fork, where miners long dead had chopped the rock into a pockmarked surface like the moon and left a sharp vertical edge, she heard something drift from the right. She lifted a hand, ready to call out to the others, then stopped herself in mid-breath. They couldn't all be trotting around chasing echoes hither and yon. She stayed in place only about thirty seconds, time enough to think there might be bats scratching around down that right tunnel, bats who ought not be disturbed. Besides, she was alone; the others had gone around a bend and been swallowed by the earth, save for a shuddering glow of light in that solid darkness.

She lifted a foot, abandoning ship before a case of the scaredy-cats could get her jumping at ghosts. Again came a sound—it seemed like a groan, maybe a sob of some sort. She put her hand out and clutched the wall, turning again, listening intently.

Somebody was crying. It sounded like a child—but a crying child, down here? She thought of Brayker's so-called Salesman: a trick? Lure

her away from the others and turn her into what Cordelia had become?

Jeryline stopped at the point of actually entering the tunnel. She had a book of matches in her pocket, of course, because no smoker ever left home without one, she supposed. Matter of fact, a cigarette right now sounded simply fabulous; what better way to chase a case of the jitters away? But her cigarettes were far away and her matches were to be ersatz flashlights now. Yet should she risk lighting one? What if the Salesman and his buddies were ten feet in front of her, holding their breath, ready to shout *surprise!* and scare her instantly to death?

Oh, too many questions. She got the matches out of the back pocket of her Salvation Army jeans and struck one. She held it overhead, staring into the tunnel with huge eyes, Jeryline the Owl Woman. A thousand bowls of light and shadow adorned the walls as before; the rusty pram track arrowed away into blackness. No Salesman, no demons. Just a severe case of the jitters and someone sobbing.

Barely breathing, sweat beginning to appear on her forehead and upper lip, Jeryline trod softly between the narrow rails. The flame touched her fingers and she flapped the match away, licked her thumb, lit another and held it as high as the ceiling would allow. Cobwebs and dust, swinging black shadows on the walls, water drops glistening like yellow gems. A poet would like this, she thought. Poets always like weird places.

The second match went out after introducing itself to her fingers, making her hiss and dance. She lit another, stuck it overhead, and saw the person who was making all the fuss. It was a kid. The kid looked at her. The kid was Danny from over at the Eureka Cafe, the cute little guy who hated Wormwood as much as Jeryline did. The two had talked a few times here and there.

Jeryline knelt in front of him. “Danny? How in the heck did you get down here? Where’s your mom and dad?”

She moved to touch his shoulder, but he jerked away. In his dark brown eyes lurked an animal sort of terror Jeryline had never seen before.

The match burned her. “Shit!” she squealed, dropping it. She rose and did a furious little dance on it. “Cheap-ass matches,” she howled, tended her wounds with her tongue, blew on her fingers knowing blisters would be erupting there soon. She switched hands, and lit another. A pair of eyes glowed alive just to her right, and she cringed back, then saw who it was.

“Homer,” she said, her voice full of relief. “What is everybody doing in the mines? Hiding?”

Homer ignored her. He slowly craned his head and looked down at Danny. “Why did you run away, son?” he asked in a strange, gutteral voice. When he looked back up again he fastened his eyes on Jeryline. “Look what you’ve done to him, you nasty bitch,” he said evenly. “You must pay the price.”

Jeryline took a backward step, knowing. She bumped into something soft, and whirled.

It was Wanda. Like Homer, she was still wearing the official Eureka Cafe apron. The pupils of her eyes were dull orange circles instead of the usual animated black.

“Ah, God,” Jeryline moaned. “Not both of you.”

Wanda’s face twisted into a dull, stupid leer. “You’ve been naughty with Danny,” she rasped. On the outrush of her breath Jeryline smelled dried blood and decay. “You must pay the price.”

The match fell from Jeryline’s fingers. She turned, tensed to run, but Danny lurched forward and took her right leg in a bear hug. Instead she dropped heavily to her knees.

Wanda dug cold fingers through Jeryline’s hair. With a piglike grunt, Homer took her head in his hands and began to twist it. Things in her neck snapped and clicked. She was able to bellow out a scream. Wanda reacted by jamming her entire fist into Jeryline’s mouth. Jeryline kicked and bucked, out of air, the muscles and tendons of her head wrenched to the breaking point, knowing that before they were done her head would be completely torn off for the others to find.

How long do you stay conscious while your head rolls away? she wondered, and blacked out.

14

It was an instinctive motion. Brayker was walking beside Roach when he heard Jeryline scream; he spun to the side and jerked the shotgun cleanly out of Roach's hands. Turning swiftly in the suddenly crazy light from the big orange flashlight, he knocked Martel out of the way, ran a step and plowed chest first into Irene's ample bazooms, careened against the wall, and rebounded into Uncle Willie's drunken path. Cursing, he disentangled himself and made it back to the fork of the tunnel, cut a hard left with the echoes of his footfalls pounding back and forth, and homed in on the unmistakeable gurgles and grunts of someone being either choked or smothered to death. It was a sound he had heard often enough.

Dark shapes were bent over Jeryline, whose blue-jeaned legs were jerking and twisting as she fought. Brayker put on the brakes, tripped against a rail, and fell to his knees, still skidding along. Sharp rocks cut through his pants, through his skin, grated across the bones of his kneecaps. One of the figures jerked upright. Brayker aimed the flashlight its way: just some average Joe whose hair stuck up like bunches of weeds, whose eyes glowed an unhealthy red, and whose face had been drained of all color. This was no demon, Brayker knew. This was a man possessed.

He fired while the shotgun was still at his hip. The top right quadrant of the man's head blew apart in a shower of blood and bone. The man staggered backward, then bared his teeth. "You there," he said while blood bubbled up to the lip of his exploded skull and began to sheet down his face. "Tried to steal my Bronco, eh? Tried to tried to tried to . . ."

The other figure became erect. This was a woman in similar shape. One of her arms dead-ended in Jeryline's mouth. As for Jeryline, not too good. Her eyes were open and rolling, twin circles of pure terror.

Brayker pumped the shotgun and fired. The woman's shoulder blew apart and splashed against the wall. Jeryline shuddered up to a sitting position and jerked the severed arm away from her mouth. An ugly blue necklace of ruptured blood vessels indicated the line where her neck would have split from her body.

Something else moved. Brayker cycled the gun with one hand, saw one more shape, trained the barrel on it.

"No!" Jeryline coughed out. She rocked to her feet, grabbed at the

figure, and lurched toward Brayker with it. A little boy, Brayker saw. Pale as white wine, tear-stains on his cheeks, dirt scuffed on his clothes. Brayker got a twinge of surprise: it was the kid from that cafe, the little shit who had foiled the attempted car thievery.

"I know this kid," Jeryline gasped. She fell against Brayker, clutching at his clothes, coughing a fine mist of blood against his shirt. "It's Danny Long. Local boy."

Brayker urged them both aside. The man he had shot was wobbling all over the place but the woman, unconcerned about her missing arm, had picked up a rock and was shambling toward him.

"Not in front of Danny!" Jeryline rasped. "It's his mom!"

Brayker hesitated. It was a tough old world sometimes, but to see your parents gunned down? Not that tough.

He tossed the flashlight at Jeryline and snatched the boy up by the back of his shirt. *"Go!"* he shouted at her, but the flashlight had smacked her on the knee and fallen to the floor of the shaft. She dropped down, madly scrabbling for it while the beam skittered across the walls and ceiling. Then she was up and running. Danny's parents gobbled unhappy things as Brayker sprinted away carrying his unusual luggage.

"Hold up!" Brayker shouted at Jeryline as she ran through the fork. She stopped and turned in a wash of fresh dust. He slowed enough to put Danny Long on his feet before dropping to his haunches to recover his breath. Damn those cigarettes, he thought. Haven't smoked since 1938, and still I get winded.

He emitted a miserable chuckle. What a zany life he had led. It would be nothing but pure relief to get rid of the key; there were times when being dead sounded so much better than being alive.

"They're still coming," Jeryline panted. Blood was running from the corners of her lips and her upper teeth had acquired some odd new angles and spaces. To cap this unfortunate beauty treatment, large clumps of her hair had been pulled out by the roots, which were not bleeding but oozing a watery, pinkish fluid. If she were to be the next keeper of the key, Brayker knew, she'd better get used to looking like shit most of the time.

Yeah . . . *if*.

A strange, windy rustling began in the darkness of the left passageway, as if Roach and crew had decided to fan themselves with newspaper. Jeryline looked at Brayker; at that moment Danny tottered to her and collapsed in her arms. She hugged him tight and stood, simultaneously offering Brayker the flashlight that now hung from her little finger.

“Wait,” he said, rising, and dug the key out.

She glared at him. “He’s just a little kid.”

Brayker awkwardly took the flashlight in the same hand that held the shotgun, aimed the beam at Danny’s face, and touched the key between his eyes.

No reaction. He put the key away and took the flashlight in a firmer grip. “This tunnel thing just isn’t going to work,” he said. “There are too many blind spots, too many branches, and it’s already been invaded. We have to go back to the basement.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Duh. What was your first clue, Sherlock?”

He ignored her, cocking his head, listening. “Wings,” he whispered. “If I’m right, we are in deep shit.”

“Bats,” Jeryline shot back. “I think I heard them before.”

He aimed the flashlight at her feet. “See those?” he said.

She looked down. “Salvation Army retreads. You got a problem with that?”

He shook his head. “Your feet, Jeryline. If you have ever run fast in all your life, run faster now.” He pumped the shotgun. “I’ll cover you to the basement.”

“What? How come? How about the others?”

He aimed the light at the other tunnel. “We should be expecting them about now.”

A new noise arose: the panting and squealing of humans on the run. In a few seconds Roach and Martel, then Irene and Uncle Willie, scrambled past on a mad rush back to the basement, tripping, falling, stumbling into the walls, climbing over each other. “Wings!” Irene wailed in passing. “Some of them got wings!”

Brayker hooked the gun across one elbow and worked the key out of its pouch once more. “Seal the hole as soon as you get in,” he said, and pushed it toward her. “You’ve seen me do it.”

She hesitated, then took it without a word.

“Go,” Brayker said, and she went.

From behind, questing fingers touched his hair, his shoulders. He spun, extending the butt of the shotgun, and smashed it across the man’s bloody face. The man staggered back, his hands still pawing at the air. Blood spiked with broken teeth drooled down his chin. The woman was faster, able to get a firm purchase in Brayker’s hair. He turned the shotgun in his hands, took it by the barrel, and with a short prayer that it would not go off by itself, plowed the butt of it against her throat. Her tongue popped out like a fat blue popsickle, and her head lolled all the way back between her shoulder blades, her broken

neckbones grating against each other as she fell away. But she would live, he knew. The parents of that kid Danny would bumble about like robots down here until their muscles began to rot from the bones, and only when their eyes had decayed sufficiently for the poison to leak out, would they find rest. The Salesman was powerful, but even he could not deny the mastery of death itself.

Brayker sprinted down the tunnel toward the basement. The whirring of wings approaching from behind was loud, punctuated now by the flopping of oversize feet against rock. The Salesman had been busy outside, very busy making these things. Perhaps every single mineshaft under this town was loaded with them. To Brayker it would be no surprise: like any good salesman, you have to keep knocking on doors to find the right buyer. And maybe that was why Harrison, whose blood was running dry in the key, had dubbed the Evil One just that: the Salesman. The guy just never knew when to give up. For two thousand years he had tracked the last key of the seven, yet here he was in Wormwood with his bag of samples and his hearty handshake, knocking on doors until people got weary of the pitch and finally start buying his wares. Cordelia had been the first customer tonight; any of the others could be next.

The beating of wings became like the roar of a hive full of gigantic bees, all of them mad and full of venom. Brayker had been under fire from these before, but never in such a small space. The first time he had heard them, in the year 1917, they sounded like the furious buzz of the French daisy-cutters, the artillery shells that exploded on the ground to release a hundred whirring pieces of shrapnel that would chew off your legs at the ankles if you couldn't find a hole to dive into or a tree that wasn't already shattered by bombs. It was the winged demons that killed Harrison, demons cut from the same satanic mold as the ones pursuing Brayker now.

Actually, upon Brayker now.

From pure instinct he turned as he ran and fired nearly straight upward. The demon's wings were only a thin green membrane stretched across skeletal arms that would go flapping like a runaway window shade when pierced; Brayker heard wings snap after the shot, and two demons thumped against the walls of the tunnel. Not quite like Danny's parents, these would drag about on their shriveled wings and brittle claws until they rotted into a form of ash.

He could see, in front of the wildly jiggling flashlight, that Jeryline and the kid were crouched together, waiting for Irene to crawl through to safety. Uncle Willie, holding himself upright by clinging to the wall, had not even begun the journey. And how many shells were left in the shotgun? There was no time to stop and check.

Jeryline turned her face to Brayker, her green eyes wide and afraid. “Hold them off,” she said, and turned away. “Irene,” she shouted, “if you don’t get your fat ass out of the way right now, there’s going to be a lot of dead people out here!”

Irene zipped out of sight. “Now you,” Jeryline said to the boy, but he clung to her, silently shaking his head. She motioned at Willie, who dropped like a sack of concrete and scampered through, no problemo, *señor,* worthless drunk or not.

“Now you,” she said, and peeled Danny away from herself. “Don’t worry about your mommy and daddy. We’ll save them too.”

He dropped on all fours and clawed through the rubble.

Brayker jerked as talons grabbed at the crown of his head, tweezing hair out, cutting ridges in his scalp. The stink of the flying ones was like damp and moldy rags, horrible. Again he hurled the flashlight at Jeryline; again she missed an impossible catch. Talons pricked his shoulders, jabbed his thighs. He lashed out with the shotgun but connected only with unimportant meaty parts. The noise of the things was one huge hum now. Wings, dozens of them, beat at his body as he was dragged to a stop. His feet were jerked apart, too far apart to maintain balance. With a grunt of effort, as he fell forward, he twisted himself over onto his back, jabbing the gun at the blur of wings. His shoulder blades slammed down hard on the floor of the shaft, no big deal, he assumed he would be dead soon. At least he had passed the key along.

Or had he?

He opened his mouth to shout. It wasn’t over, couldn’t be over, there was one thing left to do. The stampede of demons who had not come equipped with the optional flight package became a kind of thunder in its own right as they filled the tunnel. In response to his open mouth, Brayker got a cold, lumpy stalk of beak down his throat, making him gag. He crunched his teeth together and bit it off. The offending demon protested it with only a series of hisses while Brayker twisted his head to spit it out, but by then the demon had turned to ash and Brayker wound up swallowing most of it.

He heard Jeryline shout out. The weight on his chest and stomach and legs shifted, heavy here, light there, heavy here again. He realized that he was absolutely pinned to the ground by the weight of the things. It all shifted again, and he was miraculously able to sit up and shake the rest of it away.

“Your hand,” Jeryline said. “Pull on me.”

He gave her the requested hand; he pulled. Never, he recognized dazedly, never had the demons come so close to killing him. Jeryline pulled him to his feet; with the key in her other hand she continued to

hack at the air and everything in it.

He found his voice. “Go on through, Jerry. Go on through.”

“You go through, Brayker,” she said, and pushed him down onto his knees. “And don’t call me Jerry, either.”

He went, not really caring. How extraordinary it was, if just for a moment, to have someone else in charge. He shuttled through the hole and handed the flashlight to the first pair of hands he saw. The shotgun was snatched from him, no surprise in that, considering that Roach had decided it was his even before the whole tunnel fiasco came to pass. After he stood, Brayker dropped wearily again and leaned back through the hole. Martel had received the flashlight, and went down on his knees beside him.

“You know,” Martel whispered moistly into his ear, “Little Miss Jeryline is one tough young lady.”

Brayker jerked away. “Advice, Deputy,” he said. “Good friends always call her Jerry, She hates formality.”

Martel, his face still smeared green and brown from his stupid, lengthy excursion outside, winked at him. “I copy a roger to that one, Chief. And hey?”

Brayker raised his eyebrows. “Hey what?”

“When I write up my report on this, I’ll mention you in a good way. I know you’re from New York and all that, but I’ll make you look good anyway. For the papers and stuff.”

“Thank you,” Brayker said. “Thank you very much.”

Was he kidding? Not really. In the old war it had been simple, homespun kids like this who fought and died. Martel was a doofus who fancied himself to be a moderate-sized fish in a medium-sized pond. Great leaders had lived and died with bigger delusions than that.

“Come on, Jerry!” Martel cheered. “Come on through!”

She dropped to her haunches and wriggled backward through the hole, where the wind of a hundred wings blew a furious gale of dust, still chopping at the demons. Martel reached out, took hold of her rearmost belt loop, and jerked her through. She tumbled onto the cement floor, then rocked to her feet. “Do it,” she said, extending the key to Brayker.

He snatched it from her hand. “Give me light,” he grunted at Martel, and jerked the flashlight from his hand. “Now get back.”

Martel pulled away. Roach crowded forward, pushing the stench of his armpits into Brayker’s nose. “Gimme a shot,” he shouted over the noise. “Brayker, move your ass and gimme a shot!”

Brayker shook his head. He trained the flashlight on the key, ready

to thumb the orb open, but let out an involuntary gasp instead. The key was slick with blood. He swiveled the light onto Jeryline's hands.

Shiny with blood. She looked at them, her eyes widening. "I didn't know it was open," she cried. "Brayker, I didn't know!"

He looked at the key again. The small hole was partially open. The last of Harrison's blood-mix could create maybe one small drop, but no more. "Wipe your hands on the edge of the hole someplace," he said, but his voice was devoid of hope. It took a decent size drop to seal even a small window. If the drop was disturbed or just plain wasn't enough as it dried, the seal would vanish. It had happened before.

She scrubbed both hands on the jagged, dirty rim of the hole. A fantastically ugly demon shoved its head through just then. Jeryline squealed, falling back, then lunged forward again and slapped it neatly across the face. Her handprint remained, beginning to sizzle. The demon performed a hasty retreat, hissing, all three of the yellow eyes on its jaw, nose, and forehead blazing with anger.

"Has to be done," Brayker groaned, leaned forward, and shook the last drop out.

Twin lines of sparkling red fire traced the crumbly insides of the hole, and met at the top. A two-fingered claw was jabbed through enroute to Brayker's hair, and instantly turned to ash and smoke.

Brayker stood. Sweat sparkled on his face. "That ought to hold," he panted. "So much for the mines."

Roach dropped to a crouch suddenly. "Hey!" he shouted through the hole. "What are you gonna do now, you ugly fuckers?" He jabbed the shotgun at them.

"Don't shoot," Brayker warned him.

"Just look at these pinheads," Roach howled, laughing. "Who's scared of them, anyway? Not me!"

"We need to look for other openings down here," Brayker said above the noise of Roach's glee. "We can't seal it, but we can sure as hell guard it."

Roach's tone suddenly changed. "You!" he shouted. "Here's for four years of minimum wage at your stinking cafe!"

Brayker straightened in sudden alarm. He dropped to look through the hole.

The guy, that kid Danny's father, had pushed through the demons somehow and was glaring in, the exposed half of his brain shining and bloody, his face dripping. Brayker swung out to knock the shotgun aside, but too late.

"Eat this!" Roach had bellowed, and now he fired.

The cafe owner's entire head blew apart. Thin white liquid simultaneously jetted out of his shattered eyes. It splashed against the perimeter of the hole. The blood seal evaporated into a wisp of grey smoke.

Brayker tossed the flashlight aside and took two handfuls of Roach's greasy T-shirt. He hauled him upright. "You dumb little bastard," he snarled in his face. "You just killed us all."

He jerked the shotgun out of Roach's hands and shoved him away. Roach crashed down on his elbows as the first demon hand shoved through the hole unharmed. "I didn't know!" he squealed. "Don't be blaming me!"

Brayker looked at the others. "Back upstairs," he said hollowly. "Be quick or be dead."

No one offered an argument. Not even Roach. They all turned and ran as the demon horde clawed through.

For Brayker and Jeryline and Roach, for Martel and Willie and Irene, and for little Danny, the only survivors in a town of the dead, the long struggle was just about over.

But not the long night.

15

Danny was an extremely heavy kid, Jeryline Noticed as she climbed the ladder, which had mysteriously lost its bottom two rungs and required extra effort. With a groan of effort, she hoisted him overhead into Uncle Willie's waiting hands. For a drunk, Jeryline decided, the man sure could move when the heat was on.

She squirmed up through the small rectangle after Danny had been pulled out of sight, the opening to the cellar that had, until tonight, been her secret. On her knees she waddled into the warm familiarity of the Mission Inn's homey smell, got to her feet, and still managed to crack the back of her neck on the shelves loaded with preserves. The day would come, she hoped, that she would see this place burn to the ground. She still had a few matches; would anyone suspect arson on such a crazy night? She thought not.

Brayker came up next, his face heavy with concern, an observation which did Jeryline's mood no good at all. She took Danny's hand and stood away, waiting for orders, aware of the burden of fear in the faces of Irene and Martel and even Uncle Willie. The Mission Inn was under siege, and no one here had the remotest training in such military tactics, except Roach, who was some kind of ditchdigger in the National Guard. Deputy Martel had been in the army, or so he had said, but Jeryline doubted that even General Patton could organize his troops against this onslaught.

Brayker crawled out of the closet and rose tiredly up, his face perhaps the most negative of the whole bunch. He had seen these things before, it was obvious, and as the commander of this doomed troop he looked about ready to hang out the white flag. Did demons take prisoners? She tossed the errant thought away and concentrated on Brayker. He had brought all of this shit here. He was the professional.

"Up the stairway," he said, pointing. "The rooms are still sealed."

Roach burst up through the trapdoor with his hair frazzled and his T-shirt torn almost to tatters. "Pull me up!" he shrieked, jerking and squirming. "The bastards are tearing up my legs!"

Everyone, in perfect synch, looked at each other. Unspoken questions passed from eye to eye. Gazes became downcast. The group gave a communal shrug.

"It ain't funny!" Roach roared, clawing at the floor. He was jerked

down a bit, howled out a string of curses, and kicked his way back up. His eyes locked with Jeryline's and for a tiny slip of time she could see the frightened boy in him, the scaredy-cat bully.

"Hell, Deputy," she said, since Martel was closest. "Save his worthless ass."

Martel dragged him out, swiftly got hold of the trapdoor, and jammed it in place after using it as a club to smash a groping pair of claws. "Head on upstairs," he grunted as he turned on his knees. He sat on the trapdoor. It thumped and hammered. Martel raised his hands, grabbed hold of the lowest shelf as a brace of sorts, and pushed up to make himself heavier. The board popped up from its moorings and a host of Mason jars became momentarily airborne. Everyone jumped back. Jars arced down and exploded on the floor. The aroma of peaches and blackberry jam jumped into the air.

Brayker laughed. Jeryline looked at him, her face a blank slate. He laughed some more. He put a hand over his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut, helpless with growing hilarity. His knees looked as if they might unhinge and dump him on the floor. Jeryline smiled a little, utterly confused, and looked apprehensively at the others, but no one else was laughing at all.

"Up the stairway," she told them. "Irene, take Danny."

Irene took a step and snatched him up. "Come on, big boy," she crooned in his ear. "Let's go play us a game or two."

She cast Jeryline a worried glance. Brayker had sunk to his knees, wrenched into spasms by the force of his unexpected hilarity, the shotgun trailing out of his hand onto the floor, barely held by his trigger finger. The tattoo on his open hand looked dull now, the clumsy work of an amateur.

"Shit, I'll take it," Roach said, and bent over.

Jeryline kicked him in the face. It was a surprise blow to both him and her, one that knocked him completely backward. He slid a foot or two across the wooden floor, went up on his elbows, and frowned up at Jeryline. "That's gonna cost you, bitch," he said in a strange, drowsy monotone. A bright line of blood slipped from his left nostril to his lip; his tongue popped up and he sucked the blood into his mouth, his eyes narrow and cunning.

Now Martel seemed to find himself being jostled more than his taste would allow. "I'm not sitting here all night!" he shouted. "Get upstairs!"

Roach got languidly to his feet. He swiped an arm under his nose. "Gonna cost you *bad,"* he growled, plodding away. *"All* of you."

Brayker began reassembling himself. The bags under his eyes were

wet with tears of whatever mad joy he had endured. He used the shotgun as a crutch to push himself upright, chuckling at times as his bizarre merriment pricked him. Finally he stood with his jaw hanging open, staring at nothing, swaying on his feet, a man so sodden with fatigue that his entire body seemed to sag.

Jeryline went to him and offered her arm. He shifted his eyes. “Thank you, madam,” he said. “Chivalry is not dead.”

“Maybe not,” Jeryline said. “But you just about are. When’s the last time you slept?”

He made a noise. “Not since the war.”

She urged him to move toward the stairwell. “Vietnam screwed up a lot of guys,” she said. “You’re not alone in this.”

He jerked suddenly away. “My war saw seven million men die, Jerry. And it was only the first one. The second one was even more fun.”

Martel let out a whoop behind them. “Frigging *run!*” he shouted, and shot off the trapdoor like a rat under sudden light, aiming for the stairs. The trapdoor jumped out of its rectangle and skittered across the floor. Twisted arms and strange heads popped up.

Brayker blinked his tired, unhappy eyes. “I guess this war’s not over yet,” he said. His shoulders became firm and his chin tilted up a notch. He unhooked himself from Jeryline’s supporting arm and took her by the hand instead. “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings,” he said, and winked at her. “You suppose we could get Irene to sing for us?”

Now, finally, wonderfully, she laughed. It was crazy, it was inappropriate, but it was genuine.

They ran off while the demons scrabbled and clawed at the floor, each one mindlessly fighting to be the first one out.

“It started before the beginning of time,” Brayker said. “But time had no beginning, and can have no end. The keys, in various forms, were always there.”

They were huddled together in Room Five, the room Irene had assigned to Brayker earlier this evening when the world was a sane and normal place, when devils and demons were the stuff of fairy tales and religious hokum. Now the survivors sat tensely on the bed or stood on the floor to listen, at last, to the real story behind the Salesman, Brayker, and the key.

As he and Jeryline had hurried up the stairs together they had found the others waiting at the top landing: a nervous crowd, to say the least. In that instant the weather outside decided to return to the previous mode, dumping a barrage of noisy rain at the roof, jabbing

the windows with stark white light, filling the night with thunder. They were tired, Brayker could see, yet worse than that, as it became obvious that the battle was going badly, they were fed up with fighting for a cause that was, except for the need for simple survival, a complete mystery. In the first gigantic war so long ago the world had sent millions of men to fight and die without explanation, other than that their nations demanded it of them. That had been Brayker's war. But now, at the end of a century that had seen war follow upon senseless war, people at last refused to fight unless they knew why.

Knowing that, sensing that same thing among these unlikely soldiers of Wormwood, Brayker realized at last that he would have to tell them the whole story. It was not really much of a secret, but two hours ago they would not have believed it. Now they would. Gathered together in that room, with Irene and Danny and Jeryline sitting on the bed, Deputy Martel and Uncle Willie and Roach standing in various spots around it, they listened quietly to things not many humans had ever been privileged to hear.

"You all know the first book of the Bible," Brayker said. He was standing at the window, leaning stiffly against the wall beside it, uncomfortable as always when speaking in front of people who had many good reasons to be hostile. "In the beginning, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep."

"The book of Genesis," Irene said. "The forming of the earth."

Uncle Willie was recovering marvelously, or so it looked. "Let there be light," he said wonderingly. "And there was light."

"Back up one step," Brayker said. "Before the light. Before it there was darkness, but it wasn't empty. It was filled with all kinds of creatures."

Jeryline sat up straighter. "Creatures like them? The ones out there?"

Brayker frowned, hedged a bit, then nodded. He could hear that demons were tromping up the stairs, troops on the march. "Worse than them, because they were smarter," he said to Jeryline. "They had seven keys, formed into a circle that focussed the power of the cosmos into their hands, until God stepped from the darkness and created the universe. He scattered the demons and the keys."

Past the door, the Salesman's troops hissed and slobbered, scraping and punching at the walls of the hallway, grunting loudly when shocked backwards by the threat of a seal. Danny Long moaned and squirmed in Irene's arms, looked over to Jeryline, to Brayker. "We have to get my mom and dad," he said. "When are we going to save my mom and dad?"

Brayker caught Jeryline's gaze. What could be said? That his dad

was dead? That his mom was *worse* than dead? He was no good at handing out bad news; Jeryline seemed like the one best equipped to deal with Danny.

"These things happened uncountable years ago," he hurried on. "As the millennia passed, the Salesman consolidated his power. You all might have noticed how down-home dumb the demons are, like the ones outside this room right now."

"Dangerous, though," Martel said. "Skilled fighters."

Roach glanced at him. "You wouldn't know a skilled fighter if it bit you on the ass."

Martel glared back. "Don't you ever be driving drunk, hotshot. This cop will bust you all the way to Jupiter and back."

Roach took a step toward him. "Say what, flatfoot? Say what?"

Irene jumped up. "Cool it, you dorks. Can't we get along for one minute together?"

"He started it," Roach said sullenly. "Robo-Cop here."

"Robo this one!" Martel shouted, and showed him the finger.

Jeryline waved her arms overhead, snapping her fingers. "Why don't you two shut the fuck up? The kid is scared off his ass as it is!"

"Screw the kid!" Roach shouted. "If you wasn't such a chainsaw of a bitch maybe we could—"

Brayker raised the shotgun and blew a chunk out of the ceiling. Shattered bits of plaster rained down, followed by a gout of white dust. A host of wondering eyes looked up, looked at each other, then at Brayker.

He pushed himself away from the wall. "It is very likely," he said, "that I just shot the last shell out of this gun. If that is the case, it is no longer a gun, it is an umbrella stand. If you people would rather argue than live through the rest of the night, be my guest. Myself, I plan to survive. If I have to blow a couple of stupid motherfuckers out of my way to do it, gun or no gun, I will."

Spines got straight. Martel examined the floor between his boots. Roach found an interesting spot on the wall and glowered at it, his eyebrows knitted together to form a single furry line that indicated embarrassment and hate.

"Here's the guts of it," Brayker went on, satisfied. "The Salesman isn't dumb like the others. He amassed the intelligence of the old ones, the original demons, and was able to gather up six of the seven keys. Then came the day he learned of the last one, right here on earth. The keeper of the key at the time, a man named Sirach, was under attack by the Salesman and the same things we face just outside this door. Sirach found a way to protect the key. He carved a vial out of pure

quartz, and adapted the key so that it became part of it. He traveled by donkey or camel or who knows what to a small country under Roman control, and filled the vial with the blood of a young heir to the throne of Israel as he was being crucified, as his blood dripped down the cross."

Brayker paused. Only Roach was not interested in this. Irene sat up straighter. "So the blood inside the key, that's the blood of . . . the blood of . . ."

"Some of it," Brayker said. "The guardians of the keys through the centuries have refilled it with their own blood, but a trace of the original always remains."

"The blood of Christ," Jeryline whispered. "Then it really did happen."

Brayker bobbed his head. "The man who passed the key to me was named Harrison. We were in France together, World War One. He filled it with his own blood as he lay dying in my arms. He transferred the celestial mark to my hand at the moment of death."

Uncle Willie, so long silent, raised a hand. "Mr. Brayker," he said with a great frown, "I've seen many miracles on this night, and I do believe your tale. But I was born in the year 1925, and the Great War had been over some seven years by then. My own father was a cook's apprentice behind the front lines. My question is this: doesn't that make you, a much younger man, older than me?"

Brayker nodded slightly. "There exists one benefit, or side effect, of being chosen the keeper of the key: you get to live until the time comes to pass the key again. Harrison, the man who passed the key to me, had been born in 1807. He was a hundred and ten years old when he was killed."

"Shot by a German?" Willie suggested.

"Killed by the Salesman," Brayker said. "As were all the others before him."

Silence as they mulled this over. Finally Martel spoke: "Sounds like a poor career choice."

Brayker smiled with genuine humor. "Some have greatness thrust upon them. Others just plain have bad luck. Meet Silas Brayker."

"Silas Brayker?" Jeryline said. *"Silas?* You really are old."

"Thank you."

"You can win this fight, though," Martel went on, tapping his chin with a finger. "You've got us."

Roach coughed out an ugly snort of derision. "That's half his problem," he said. "He's got *you* dimwits."

"Oh, bite it," Irene snapped. "Mr. Brayker, what happens if the

Salesman gets the last key? Will we be affected?”

“Most likely,” Brayker said. “He might want things back the way they used to be. With the power of the seven keys he can undo all creation, and he’d probably start with the earth. This is where the last key has eluded him for so long.”

“That’s it, then,” Uncle Willie said. “We’re all in this for the same thing, and that thing is survival.”

Martel stepped toward the door, where things beyond were thumping and stomping. “That’s been my point all along. I’ve been trained in both military and police tactics, highly trained by experts. The first thing anybody should do under an attack like this is establish a perimeter.”

Roach groaned something unintelligible.

“Deputy,” Brayker said, “I believe our perimeter is pretty well established already. There are six rooms here that are sealed against intrusion. We’re in one of them. And we can’t get out.”

“All the more reason to try. The primary mission of every trapped soldier is to make his way back to his own front line.”

“Which is?”

“The perimeter.”

Roach slapped both hands to his face. “That does it,” he said into his palms. “I would rather be eaten alive than listen to one more word from fucknuts here. Somebody open the door.”

Jeryline looked up at him. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not. I’m going to cut across the hall no matter what happens, cause I’d sure as hell rather spend the night with Cordelia and Wally’s dead bodies on the floor than one more minute with this ignorant fool.”

Martel bristled. “Yeah? Yeah?”

Roach looked at Brayker. “If you must shoot that thing again,” he said, indicating the shotgun in Brayker’s hand, “at least use it to kill somebody we all know and love.”

He took a step in front of Martel, laughed in his face, and feigned hitting him in the nose with a slow-motion punch. “Dickbrain,” he muttered.

Martel darkened, clenched his lips into a thin angry line, and shoved him away. Roach reeled across the room and crashed backward into Brayker. Both fell across a small chest of drawers, crunching it back into the cheap plywood it had originally been, and went sprawling on the floor. Brayker had enough presence of mind to clamp down hard on the gun so that Roach couldn’t jerk it away. This whole newest confrontation seemed awkward, somehow phony. Brayker would not put it past Roach to invent a scene like this just to

get the shotgun.

Roach jumped up immediately, wagged a naughty-boy finger at Martel, and pushed past him without further confrontation. Brayker was helped to his feet by Jeryline and Danny, Brayker feeling the old age in his joints, the bone-deep fatigue in his muscles. Ah, but to give the key away. It would be the start of his retirement, which would be short.

Roach tested the knob, licked his lips, looked back at Brayker. Brayker moved his head slightly back and forth: don't do it, fool. But Roach did it anyway, whipped it open, eyed the demons pressed at the edge of the blood seal, and plunged into them with a shout. He was even courteous enough to shut the door.

Willie had gone a little pale. "I'll be damned," he whispered, his eyes bright and mystified. "The little bastard's got a spine after all."

Jeryline, standing beside Brayker with Danny's hand in hers, looked at him with confusion clouding her eyes. "It's suicide," she said in the high, squeaky tones of disbelief. "Isn't it?"

Brayker was frowning at the door, not quite able to believe what he had just seen. Not long ago he had told Jeryline that a crisis could bring out the good or the bad in people, but had forgotten that it could also bring out the stupidity in some. Roach was a stupider man than Brayker had thought; now he was a stupid dead man.

"That brings the tally to four," Irene said with her voice hushed. "How can we ever survive the night at this rate?"

"By staying in this room," Brayker said. "By staying alive through till morning."

"Sounds like vampire hours," she said. "Do they all burn up in the sunshine? Sleep in a coffin all day?"

Brayker sensed anger in these words, but that was all right. Anger was a much more useful emotion than fear, and the only emotion that could overpower it. He raised his tattooed palm. "The seven stars are aligned in a circle right now," he said. "At daybreak they will switch out of alignment if I am still alive."

"Strange," Uncle Willie murmured. "Who makes up the rules?"

"I don't know," Brayker responded. "But I do know that they exist. The physical universe consists of four known dimensions: length, width, breadth, and time, to boil it down past the basics. All of reality conforms to those requirements. The key is a physical object, and its fourth dimension is time. Even the Salesman must act within that framework."

Martel was frowning. "You lost me on the last part, Professor."

Brayker shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter much, Deputy."

He turned to look out the window. “What matters is that the Salesman is out there, and we are safe in here.” Motion caught his eye below. He stepped closer to the window, looking down at the yard at this side of the building, which held no grass at all, just a few forlorn balls of tumbleweed that had dead-ended against a crumbling old fence there. Four, maybe five demons were handling a piece of white cloth, jerking it from hand to misshapen hand, fighting over it like drunken pirates battling over a treasure chest.

Brayker’s jaw tightened. It was Roach’s rag-tag T-shirt.

The bedroom door slammed suddenly. Brayker jerked his head around. Irene was just beginning to rise off the bed. “Danny!” she screamed, pressing her fists to her cheeks. “Come back here!”

Brayker’s heart sank a notch. He had ignored the kid’s only concern here. Now he was off on a private rescue mission to find his parents. He wouldn’t make it down the stairs.

Jeryline was up and charging. She worked the knob and whipped the door open just as Brayker was positioning the shotgun. Martel was behind her, Irene was in front of Brayker. He pushed her aside with the barrel of the gun hard enough to pitch her across the bed. She bounced a few times and sat up.

“Wow,” Jeryline gasped.

The demons were gone. She stepped hesitantly out, looked both ways with her hair swaying to and fro, and looked back at Brayker. “Nothing,” she said. “No demons, no Danny.”

Brayker moved beside her and scanned the hallway: to the right, a dead end adorned with flowery wallpaper; to the left, where the hallway led past two more doors and on across to the top of the stairway, nothing. Brayker’s frown settled in more deeply. These were unusual tactics, if they were tactics at all. If it was a trick to lure them downstairs, it was crude beyond belief. If it was just a ruse to get them out of Room Five, it wouldn’t work.

Depending, though, on where the hell Danny had just gone.

He pulled back in and found Jeryline’s worried eyes. At that moment a door to his left thumped loudly shut. He whirled. All of the doors up here were closed, all of them sealed against anything supernatural, all of them looking snug and secure and untouched.

“I think it came from downstairs,” Jeryline whispered. The other three crowded close behind them, Martel and Willie and Irene, gawkers in a circus that might last until dawn.

Irene elbowed her way forward. “They’re gone. Praise be. But I know the Mission Inn better than anybody, and I tell you that was a paying door.”

Her hair was in Brayker's nose, smelling sourly of vinegar and recent coloring. "Paying door?"

Jeryline gave him a small shrug. "All the upstairs rooms are paying rooms. The money-makers in this dive."

"Dive?" Irene stuck her chin out. "The finest lodging between Junction City and Cactus Flowers, I'll tell you that."

"The only lodging," Jeryline grumbled.

Irene glowered. "Consider your work release over with, missy. It's back to the slammer with you."

"Thank you," Jeryline said. "At least I don't clean toilets there."

"As if you ever cleaned any *here."*

Martel shoved Irene aside before Jeryline could inflict a fat lip. "We need to expand our perimeter," he jabbered at Brayker. "It's the perfect time to retake the rooms, enlarge our front."

Brayker dragged a hand wearily over his face. "Verdun," he said in monotone. "The Somme. Flanders. Nobody ever learns."

"Huh?"

"Famous battles now forgotten," Brayker said. "Enlarging the front to the tune of millions of lives. Get back behind me before you leave me with no option but to kill you."

Martel ducked slowly away, looking puzzled.

Uncle Willie's voice drifted from the rear echelon now. "Too many chiefs, not enough Indians. Why don't everybody just shut up and let the man think?"

Brayker straightened. He would have a big thank-you waiting for Willie when this ordeal was over. "Okay, everybody, first assignment. There are five of us, and five more rooms. Pick one and go in, look for the kid, turn around, come back. Don't make it any harder than it needs to be."

Martel let out a long, windy sigh. "You know," he said, "if I was in charge I'd sure issue room numbers."

Brayker stepped into the hallway, alert, watching, ready to fire at anything. "Okay, Deputy," he said, and turned. "Issue room numbers, and we'll spread out."

"Great!" Martel rubbed his hands together, showing a lot of teeth. "Okay now, everybody fall in."

Lots of eyes looked up at him, looked over to Brayker. Brayker wagged his head while the touch of a smile shaped his mouth. "Let's just do it," he said, and all of them hurried away without having fallen in anything at all.

16

Wallace Pickerford Gimley had two secrets in his heart just now. This late in the night these secrets were beginning to bog down inside him like the burdensome weight of precious silver, but it was slowly seeming like a dirty kind of silver. Being the town drunk, he had of course been tossed from this place many a time, which was no secret, but he knew secrets about this place that Irene did not. While it was true that all small, mom-and-pop towns like this one had a town drunk, what was not known in any of them was that the town drunk had his finger on the pulse of society more firmly than anyone else.

Case in point: four years ago a respectable young fellow named Freddie Harling got engaged to one of the last available girls in town, Mary Southford. There were no country clubs within farting distance of Wormwood, but the extended Harling family considered themselves monied, so they staged a private bash in the former Elks lodge (BPOE #1109) that was now empty with a big FOR SALE COMMERCIAL PROPERTY sign in the front window. On that evening Willie had waited outside until the booze started to flow inside, stepped primly up the steps in his Favorite-Uncle-of-the-Family mode, gained entrance, and drank himself silly on kegged beer (for the men) and casked wine (for the women). He was eventually recognized and booted out. Later that night he awoke from a fractured sleep between two trashcans to see young Freddie Harling getting a very special on-her-knees favor from his girlfriend's older sister LeeAnne, who just happened to be married.

Case in point: before the Hometown Drug Store on South Mickawah Street folded two years ago, Uncle Willie had been dozing in the gutter on the shaded side of the store when John Farnswordy, who owned the place and for years had hired only teenage girls as clerk/cashiers, scurried out of his store and got into his vehicle with Pamela Friesen, who had barely started high school. The vehicle went nowhere, though it moved around a lot. As John Farnswordy exited the vehicle, nervously checking his clothing for proper alignment, Wallace Pickerford Gimley stood up and winked at him. It is legal to sell liquor in drug and grocery stores in New Mexico, so for a while Uncle Willie had a steady supply. Suddenly the liquor license got cancelled, the exodus from the town continued, and Farnswordy moved on.

But those incidents, and dozens like them (most not that juicy),

occurred over the space of a decade and were no longer important. The only secret things in Willie's mind right now were Wally Enfield, currently dead, and the fact that this old inn had been a brand-new, sap-popping wooden church that Irene and a lot of work-release prisoners had converted into a hotel. There were churches left and right in this nation, and mighty few of them were lacking a steeple. Or belltower. Or whatever.

This was the deal: Uncle Willie, prowling his usual aimless route on a rainy night not long ago, happened to amble past the Mission Inn. It was quite late, but Wally Enfield was still up and about. His white Jeep mail-truck was parked dangerously on Irene's private lawn and he was hauling a big canvas bag out of it. Willie watched as Wally stalked inside on his tippy-toes, eased the front door shut, and stayed gone a good five minutes before reappearing. He dragged another bag across the lawn, up the steps, grunting and cursing under his breath the whole time, and hauled it inside. The third bag he simply tossed onto his shoulder and hiked away with, but this one clanked and rattled.

Willie had been drunk, but not too drunk to wonder. He marched up to the front door, stood there swaying as if clutched in a powerful breeze, decided not to knock, and staggered back down to the lawn. The door opened and Wally Enfield came out lightly as a feather. He turned and sucked in a quick breath when he saw Uncle Willie.

"This is nothing," he rattled out in very harsh but whispered tones, looking wildly about. "Forget you're even here."

"I usually do," Willie answered.

"Good," Wally said. "Good night to you, then."

"Usually do, but not this time," Uncle Willie said. He was not a mean man or a man given to preying on the oppressed, but he did have to support himself, or at least lay in some food for the coming winter. "I get most forgetful when drinking heavily. Would you know if Irene keeps a stash inside?"

Wally moaned and groaned for a while. Willie felt genuine pity for the little man, but his liver was sounding the gong and without prompt relief might start to function again. Death would ensue.

"Not that I know of."

"Then a trip to the store might be in order."

Wally got the picture. Shaking his head, he went hurriedly to the Jeep and met Uncle Willie inside. "Which store?" he groaned dispiritedly.

"Any place that sells eighty-proof."

Wally turned his head and locked his tired eyes with Willie's bright

and expectant ones. “Old man,” he said, “it is the middle of the night. Everything is closed.”

“Not everything,” Willie said, raising a finger of righteousness. “The Texaco station way out on Highway 47 has beer and wine.”

Wally Enfield rested his forehead on the upper part of the steering wheel. “It’s too late at night. Nobody will sell you anything.”

Uncle Willie had liked this next part because it was so very, very true. “It is too late,” he agreed. “But it only takes a little bit of grease to make the wheels of progress turn.”

Wally cranked his head slowly around. His eyelids were small and uneasy. “Progress turn?”

Uncle Willie had grinned so very big then: “Cashiers make minimum wage. A ten or twenty dollar bill seizes them like a hook in the lips of a fish. I’ll take five bottles of Thunderbird, chilled.”

That had been the essence of it. Wally Enfield had been doing something under heavy secrecy, and Willie had used that discovery to gain five bottles of Thunderbird, a pseudo-wine heavily spiked with chemically produced alcohol. Willie drank as they motored back to the Mission Inn, killing almost an entire bottle, which slid down smoother than ice cream on a hot spoon, despite the ghastly taste. Back at the inn, Wally Enfield parked the Jeep on the gravel where it was supposed to be. “That ends it,” Wally had said, but Uncle Willie had already decided that spending a night in the rain, booze galore or not, should not have to happen to someone who had witnessed a federal crime. Groaning under the burden of his new mission, Wally Enfield guided Uncle Willie up to the square little belfry under the spire, made a mattress of sorts out of the dozens of mail bags stashed there, and left him to his own devices. So, until recently no one had known the first secret—that Wally was stealing the mail—but himself and Uncle Willie, though Wally later came under suspicion at the post office in Junction City, and had got his little ass fired just a few hours ago.

Now, though, there was a problem with secret number two: how to get into the damn steeple. Willie’s memory of that night had foundered upon the shoals of passing time and mucho boozo. Had he left any of that Thunderbird in the steeple? Even a drinker such as he would have had trouble drinking five whole bottles. His mind held no recollection of drinking the rest, of falling asleep, of finding his way down and sneaking out in the morning, though something told him Irene had run him out of the parlor with a flyswatter. Had he taken the unused bottles with him? Or were they still up there along with a thousand stolen letters and a mysterious bag that had clanked when

the errant postman carted it up?

He did solidly remember being in Wally's room on that night. For that reason he was now standing in it again, having elbowed Jeryline out of the way as the search for Danny began. He saw that Wally had been pilfering other items from the post office: big shiny posters on the walls and ceiling that extolled the USPS's many services, samples of various mailing bags pinned here and there, even several brass plaques naming someone else as employee of the month—John Ferguson, Elroy P. Quirty, James Andrews, Patricia Hall. Uncle Willie mentally rolled his eyes; Wally Enfield was one strange character, or at least had been, now that he was deader than possum pizza cooking on a hot country road.

Willie checked inside the closet, scrutinized the ceiling for a trapdoor of some kind. No luck. He turned in a lurching circle, the pleasure sensors in his sobering brain demanding more alcohol. Thunderchicken might taste like airplane fuel, but it was one hell of a flight and worth fighting for. But how the frig had Wally taken him up to the belfry, if a little old steeple atop a former church could be called that?

Willie crossed to the door, gently turned the lock in the knob, and got down to serious brainwork. It was like this: steeple = up. Up = overhead. Normal means of passage up or overhead = stairs. Somewhere there was a stairway.

He sat on the bed and beat his fists against the sides of his head. Think, Wallace Pickerford Gimley! Kick-start the old brain!

In his despair he looked to the ceiling, as if God might hand down the blueprint of the building. Instead he saw that the late Wally Enfield had tacked almost all the overhead posters in one corner. The effect was quite out of balance, but then, Wally had been that way, too.

The room was graced with only one chair. Willie carried it to the corner, stood on it with visions of fractured bones making him careful, and began unpinning the posters. Immediately he saw a very straight crack in the plaster. He unpinned some more. A foot-long length of dirty white twine uncoiled before his eyes, dangling toward the floor, and he remembered at last.

A pull-down stairway. Wally had kept it hidden under these posters. But why, eh? As if Irene didn't know of its existence, just as she hadn't known there was a basement? Impossible. She had been here during the remodeling. Maybe Wally had kept it covered so long she had forgotten. Willie himself had forgotten a few things in his time, har-har.

He levered the stairway down, got off the chair and eased it aside

with a foot, and pushed the whole contraption downward until it touched the floor, where it seemed to silently lock somehow.

“Daddy’s coming to get you,” he chortled excitedly. “Hang in there, my little Thunderchickens.”

At the top he stepped up into the belfry, looked around at the humps and angles of mailbags secretively protected from the rain, and nodded.

“Where are you?” he crooned.

Something banged down below. Willie dropped silently to his knees and clawed at the uppermost stair, splitting his thick yellow fingernails and getting nowhere in the job of pulling it up.

“Think, Wallace,” he muttered. “Think!”

He thought. On both sides of the top stair some kind of hinged metal straps resembled Erector sets. Willie pawed at them, found a lonely little lever, and pushed it down with his thumb.

The stairway groaned. It began to rise. Willie helped it out as best he could, made sure it shut very softly, and turned again. Rain was drumming on the steeple and dripping off the tidy little eaves, but the belfry was mostly dry. There was no light to speak of, but Uncle Willie did not mind, because this was like Christmas all over again, and Santa had surely left him a present or two.

He crawled a step and began poking and prodding under the bags, grinning, almost faint with the need for a festive holiday beverage.

As it turned out, Santa had been good to him.

Jeryline was in her own room, finding nothing but her lonely bed, her dresser, her closet that held only a few jeans and blouses and underthings, and her posters of Paris. She did not believe Danny had slipped out of her grasp just to hide in another room. He had surely bolted down the stairs to save mommy and daddy, and died in the process. And maybe, she thought, it was better that way. No kid deserves to be an orphan at age eight. Even Jailbait Jerry had had a living parent around to watch her screw up her teenage life.

She went down on her knees to give a glance under the bed. Of course he was not there; she did this just to be able to tell Brayker that she had looked in all possible places. When she wearily rose again, the Salesman’s bright, leering face was two inches from her own, all smiley and happy.

She gasped and fell back on her butt. He was lying on her bed with his elbow propped on the pillow, his head propped on his hand. “Welcome to your life, Jeryline Bascombe,” he said.

She gaped at him. He was wearing a blue uniform with yellow

patches on the shoulders, a shiny chrome badge on the chest, a holster with a black revolver stuck in it. “I wanted you to feel right at home,” he said, and sat up.

The room changed somehow. Jeryline looked around with terror thundering in her heart. Iron bars blocked the window now. The door was made of dirty steel, and a toilet adorned one lonely corner.

Prison. Solitary, in fact.

“Don’t scream,” he said. “First listen to what I’ve got to say, then scream if you must. Deal?”

She stumbled to her feet and ran to the door. Cold metal had replaced the knob. She turned and pressed her back to it, reminded so very much of the first time she was beaten senseless by her cellmate.

“Ah, you’re so young,” the Salesman said. “So very much to live for. And yet, where have you wound up? Here, stuck in this house, stuck in this town, when all you want is to get out and be left alone. To go places, to see things.” He looked at one of her posters. “You want Paris, Jeryline?”

She shifted her eyes from side to side, looking for a weapon, any weapon.

“Paris I can give you,” he said. “Look.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. Something touched her shoulder, pricked her skin. She slapped at it. It squawked and was gone.

“So beautiful in the springtime,” the Salesman said.

She opened her eyes. In front of her the Eiffel tower rose into a perfect blue sky. Pigeons flapped and circled while tourists tossed crumbs onto the cobbled street. The Salesman was beside her, dressed now in Bermuda shorts and a straw hat with a huge camera hanging from a strap around his neck. “Give me the good old USA anytime,” he drawled. “We saved their French asses in two world wars and they still hate our guts. That’s the froggies for you.”

He raised the camera and snapped her photo. Instantly she was back in her room, her familiar room, and the Salesman was still sitting on the bed wearing the uniform of a Colorado prison guard. “Aren’t tourists annoying? I can get you to France, even give you the language. Or would you choose this?”

She did not have time even to blink. Harsh white light popped alive in the corner by the closet. Four demons were dismembering and eating a man. They turned with their misshapen lips curling into ugly grins, blood dripping from their teeth, crudely amputated arms and legs in their hands. The man’s abdomen had been slashed open and was empty. Suddenly he jerked his head up and shrieked in agony.

It was Brayker. The scene shut down instantly.

"That is his future," the Salesman said. "And yours if you follow him."

She was sweating hard, her hair sticking to her face, her lungs wheezing. "You can't be in here," she croaked. "The blood seal . . ."

"Nice of you to take care of it," he said, and glanced at her feet. She shoved an arm onto the wall for balance and inspected the bottom of her right shoe. Nothing unusual. The tread marks were worn slick by overuse, no late-breaking news in that. She shifted and checked the other one.

Something like a scab was stuck to her heel.

"You'll be hearing from me again real soon," he said. "And you can scream now if you want to."

As she gaped at him his clothing changed. She thought of *Bewitched,* of Samantha, the fast way she could cast her spells. The Salesman was now wearing shapeless white clothes, sandals, and had a colorful blanket tossed over one shoulder. Best of all, a huge sombrero was parked on his head.

"Adios, amiga," he said, and was gone.

Muttering, eventually crying, she ripped her Paris posters down from the walls and shredded them between her hands.

17

The search for Danny Long was over in less than two minutes. Brayker found no surprise in the fact that it failed. It was just another notch in the Salesman's pistol, and he had carved many notches there over the years. Neither Uncle Willie nor Jeryline were back yet, another cause for concern. He went to the door and looked out: still no demons, and no Willie or Jeryline. Just as he was drawing back, the door of Jeryline's room wafted slowly open and she came out. A rush of relief charged through his veins. With Jeryline dead the whole war was lost.

If she truly were to be the next keeper of the key. For all he knew, it might well be Martel, or even Irene. His duties had come without an instruction manual.

His mind jumped back to his own initiation into the club. It was a moment he wished had never happened. He had not asked for the key and the duties it entailed. He was just a private in the army trying to keep from getting his ass blown off. His commanding officer had been Lieutenant Stephen Harrison, who had found life in the military to be the best way to keep the Salesman away. He had not known he would be shot in the trenches of World War One; he probably had not known who the next keeper of the key would be at all. But Silas Brayker had been there to watch him die.

The assault had failed. It was summertime but the fog was thick and cold. Harrison had caught a bullet just as he and Brayker dived into a shallow, unfinished trench. French flares were wafting down on their little parachutes, creating a fantastic moonscape of shattered trees and cratered earth. Brayker and Harrison were caught between the lines, doomed to wait for the next attack to jump up and rejoin their unit, or to die under the next hail of artillery fire.

In that ungodly light, Harrison had taken the key out of its pouch and begun filling the orb with the blood that was bubbling out of the huge hole in his guts. As he did so he told Brayker the history of the key, of a man in biblical times named Sirach who made the orb and filled it with Christ's blood. As a last act Harrison had pressed Brayker's palm against his. If Brayker had doubts about the story, he lost them in a hurry. Intense pain stabbed his hand. Green light shot between the creases of his skin. It was only when Harrison's strength was gone that his hand fell away at last, and Brayker had inherited the

tattoo.

On-the-job training followed swiftly. A huge, curious rustling grew over the battlefield. The flares swung and danced in the sky, pushed by a sudden, unnatural wind. Silhouetted against them were creatures with broad flapping wings and bloated, hideous bodies the size of a very fat man.

"You'd better run now," Harrison said. He pulled the pouch out of his uniform and put the key inside, then hooked it over Brayker's neck. "Run now and never stop."

Those were his last words. Confused and terrified, Brayker had scrambled out of the hole as the creatures alighted and began to tear Harrison apart. One of them swooped down and fastened its claws into Brayker's back. A machine gun somewhere chattered, then another. The winged demon fell away and began to flounder about with its wings in shreds. Artillery opened up on both sides. The war kicked back into full swing, and in the chaos Brayker made it back to his own lines.

What a happy ending. Brayker had never been so surprised to be alive. It was only later, during periods of depression as the years ground on, that he wished a bullet or bomb had ended his life that night. He had been nineteen years old, the same age as so many millions of boys on both sides who died in a war that made no sense, and only led to another.

Now Brayker tapped his forehead with his fist, knocking the memories aside, memories he had rehashed thousands of times that brought only grief with no solution. Even with the power of the key he could not change the past, only the future.

People were looking at him. "Uncle Willie's missing," he said. "Anybody know why?"

Irene plopped herself down on the bed. "Probably passed out somewhere."

Brayker shook his head. "He's not that drunk. Which room is he searching?"

Martel looked smug. "Should have let me assign numbers after all, huh?"

"He went into Wally's room," Jeryline said. Brayker eyed her for a brief second, wondering. She looked as if she'd stuck a finger into a light socket, all windblown and disoriented.

"I'll check it," Martel said, and hurried out.

Brayker rubbed his forehead as if to massage the troubling thoughts away. The need for sleep was wooing him again with promises of needed rest and dreams that would not be remembered. The shotgun

felt slick and oily in his hand, reminding him that most men who go to war do not have to carry guns after the war is over. He had been given the gift of an extended life, but at a terrible price.

Martel, the dirtiest deputy in the west, charged back in with a grin and eyes that spoke of late-breaking news. "I know where he's at," he said. "Irene, you're gonna shit about eighteen bricks. There's a big trapdoor in the ceiling of that room. It must go up to the attic, and that's where old Willie went."

Irene frowned and moved her head slowly from side to side. "I know how to get into the attic," she said. "There's a panel at the end of the hall that you push up. I thought about getting insulation blown up there and decided not to. It never gets very cold, and air conditioning is out of the question."

"You better think again," Martel said, and smacked his hands together. "This old place is just plain stuffed with trick doors. Come on, everybody."

The two tromped out. Brayker ran a hand through his hair, which contained no hint of gray at all. At his age, he often thought, and with what he'd been through in his life, he should be gray to the roots and bald as an egg, both at the same time. Not to mention being in an insane asylum.

Jeryline had decided not to follow and sat instead on the bed, visibly weirding out. "You okay?" he asked her. "I've seen you better."

She turned her head. "How does the Salesman do what he did to Cordelia? How does he take over a soul?"

Brayker moved closer to her, hovering at the edge of sitting down beside her, deciding not to. "He seduces the person. It's kind of like mental rape, I guess, but gentle in its own way. He makes a proposal, and you either accept it, or you don't. If that doesn't work, he scares you. Shows you scenes from your family, threatens to hurt them if you don't accept his offer."

She brightened a tone or two. "So it's all bluff? He really wouldn't do something like that?"

Brayker did sit beside her. "Oh, no bluff at all. He can do anything he wants to do, and usually does."

She faced him. "Then why hasn't he gotten you yet? For the key he could offer anything you want."

"True," Brayker said. In spite of the dismal hour of the night, in spite of the crazy series of events, he was entranced by the smell of her. She had worked in the kitchen untold hours, had cooked a supper for him—and a pretty damned strange one, pudding for supper—had run around with him as they fought to stay alive, and still she smelled

nice, although she did look like a piece of warmed-over dogshit right now.

"Have you ever just listened to him?" she asked. "Listened to his pitch, I guess you'd call it. He's a salesman, and he has a good pitch."

Brayker laid the shotgun on the bed and touched her hand. "What did he pitch to you?"

She rubbed her eyes, then dragged her fingers down to her chin, making monster faces on the way. "Paris. I would kill to go to Paris."

Brayker bobbed his head up and down. "It is a very nice city."

"You've been there?"

"Yep. Been there, seen it, moved on."

"To Wormwood, New Mexico."

"An undiscovered tourist haven. Why else would Irene open a hotel in the middle of Cactustown? She's a very shrewd businesswoman."

Jeryline drew back from him. "You have got to be kidding."

He drew away from her, and blinked both eyes at once. "You're right, I have got to be kidding. What was I thinking?"

She laughed. When she leaned back toward him their shoulders touched, but she did not draw away; instead, she seemed to lean on him slightly. Unusual thoughts buzzed through his mind, but he stamped them out. "So he was in your room just now? You erased the blood seal for him?"

"Are you nuts? No way—at least not on purpose. The drop of blood dried up and scraped off on my shoe when I walked in."

He took a deep breath. "It's gotten too old," he said. "Fresh hot blood soaks in, you can't get rid of it without a knife or some scrubbing. The old stuff just sits there and hardens like a scab, it comes off too easy."

"Exactly," she said.

Silence fell between them. Brayker let his eyes slide shut, thinking of sleep, thinking of Jeryline, thinking of the things that would never happen between them because an oversized key made out of iron and silver and quartz stood in the way. And his age, don't forget that. It was a mismatch made in heaven.

He touched his throat. "Uh, Jeryline?"

Her response was delayed, as if she were drowsing as well. "Yeah?"

"You and I, um, it's too bad that we, um . . ."

It was no use. He had spent his life on the run and his time was drawing to an end; this he could feel.

"Never mind," he said softly.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and took his big clumsy hand

in her small, calloused one. “It’s always that way,” she murmured. “Everybody I hate at first, winds up being a really good person.”

He smiled. “We did have a rocky start, didn’t we?”

“Two hardheads with an attitude.”

“Sorry. Really.”

It occurred to him to kiss her. Simply lift a hand and use a curled finger to slowly raise her head, gaze deeply into her eyes, find the permission that surely was inside them, and press his lips to hers. Nothing could be easier.

Or harder. He groaned inside. He was ninety-seven years old. She was young—worse than young, she was a minor. But somehow, he felt, somehow, he was still the same nineteen years old he had been when Harrison passed the key to him.

The point became unimportant as Martel appeared in the doorway. “It’s a pull-down stairway up to the attic. Me and Irene’s going up now, and I’ll need the shotgun.”

Brayker picked it up. “I don’t see how anything could get up there,” he said. “Besides, we’ll all be safe in here.” He looked down at the deputy’s scuffed and dirty boots, but he was standing outside the perimeter of the door—a use, finally, for his favorite word and thing, the perimeter-minded fool. “Why don’t you step in here first, Deputy?”

Martel scowled and started to tap his foot. “Our mission at this point is to save the kid, Brayker, and sitting around isn’t going to make it happen.” He motioned with a finger whose nail was still crusted with dry mud. “The shotgun, and I mean now.”

Brayker growled under his breath. Since the war he had not liked taking orders from anyone, especially young officers who thought themselves duty-bound to send soldiers to die in hopeless battles. “Deputy,” he said evenly, “if you insist on roving around in the attic you may have this weapon with all my blessings, but please be careful not to blow your own stupid ass off. Now come in and get it yourself.”

Martel stepped inside, chuckling into his own throat. “Mister,” he said as he pulled the shotgun into his hands, “you can forget the easy treatment in my official police report. From this point on, consider yourself a wanted man.”

He stalked away, grabbed the edge of the door, and slammed it hard on the way out. Brayker hung his head, shook it. “Dipshit,” he said softly. “Such a small world, so many dipshits. At least he made it through the door without sizzling.”

“Actually,” Jeryline said, “he’s better than most cops. Stupider, but better.”

Brayker could only shrug.

“I wonder if Danny made it back to his mom and dad,” she said. She was silent for a time, then sighed and touched her forehead. “What am I thinking? They’re no better than the guys in the cheap rubber monster suits.”

Brayker raised his head. “Huh?”

“The demons. At first I thought they were just some jerks in costumes. Then I realized they were actors in costumes. Things became so real, I decided they were demons in fake costumes. Eventually, though, I had to recognize the truth.”

“It does take a while.”

“It does. Now I realize what they really, really are. Has-been TV stars from the Seventies. Criminals never booked by Dan-O on ‘Hawaii Five-O.’ Unloved passengers on ‘The Love Boat.’ Ugly girls who never made it to ‘Charlie’s Angels.’ That’s the daytime shows they piped in for us to watch in prison.”

He found himself on the verge of laughing. His life had been hell, this night was hell, Jeryline looked like hell just now, and so did he. About eight minutes ago he had laughed like a hyena when Martel broke all the jars of jelly and preserves on the floor in his attempt to keep the trapdoor to the basement closed. Now Martel was about to investigate the attic armed with a gun that was probably empty, an attitude that was overblown, and a burning desire to be a hero. He would not make it much farther into the night.

Jeryline stood up. “I’m going to see what all the whoop-de-doo’s really about. Maybe Danny got up into the attic somehow.”

Brayker eyed her. “Do you really think so?”

She rubbed her face again. “Not really. But it’s better than sitting around while he’s out there all alone.”

Brayker stood up as well. “You’re right. As long as I’ve got the key, you and I should be safe enough.” He patted the pouch under his shirt. “Let the others check the attic. You and I can check other places. But there’s something you need to be ready for.”

She spread her hands. “Try me.”

“If we find Danny, he’s most likely going to be dead. Can you deal with that?”

She took a long breath. “I think I can. Tonight I’ve had to deal with all kinds of horrible things.”

“Okay, then,” he said and took her arm. “Let’s do it.”

18

“You sniveling, lying son of a bitch!” Irene Galvin shouted. “How long have you been staying up here behind my back? Six months? A whole year?”

Willie shot to his feet. He had only drunk about half the bottle of Thunderbird and here she was ready to ruin the rest of his night. The hammering rain that had sounded so pleasant as he sat among the mailbags now sounded like a hail of firing-squad bullets. “This is the first time I was ever up here,” he bleated.

Martel was clomping up the steps behind her, a shape in the dark. “What’s old Willie gone and done now?” he asked Irene. “And jeez—this ain’t no attic.”

She ignored him. “So I guess you just now shit that bottle of booze, eh? How the hell did you find out about this place?”

“ ’Twas Wally Enfield that told me,” he said.

“Nosy little pecker.” She took a step toward him, reaching out. He jerked the bottle closer to his chest, knowing that she would do as women have done all through the centuries: dump out his booze. In his mind that was alcohol abuse of the most sinister kind.

Instead she poked at the mailbags. “Holy hula hoops,” she breathed. “Bob, where the hell did that flashlight go?”

“Dunno,” Martel said.

“Well, go find it. I think there’s a side to Wally Enfield that none of us knew about.”

He failed to move, fidgeting instead. She turned. “Going deaf, Deputy?”

“Well,” he said, “I’m kind of in charge of this mission now, so I’ll be giving the orders. I am an officer of the law, you know.”

“Officer this,” she said, and Willie did not need a singing telegram to inform him which finger she was exercising. “Move it!”

He shuffled unhappily around and tromped downward, muttering things.

“I haven’t been up in this old belfry for years,” she said, turning to Willie. “Wally had all his posters covering the fold-down, and I figured he didn’t know it was here.” She poked at the bags some more. “The post office was right. He was stealing the mail.”

Willie kept silent, taking advantage of the moment to sneak a drink.

"Crazy little shit. Gimme that."

She plucked the bottle out of his hands. Rather than dump it overboard, though, she plugged it in and sucked on it. Willie felt genuine pity for her, if this was her first experience with Thunderchicken. It wasn't as deadly as Aqua-Net, but close.

She lowered the bottle. "That brings back some memories. My late husband used to mix this with root beer." She smacked her lips and went for more.

Willie's stomach jumped with fright. For the first time in months he felt ill.

Martel was back, this time preceded by a sharp white beam of light. "Had it stuck in my holster the whole time," he said. "Must have put it there while we were running out of the basement. Funny, huh?"

"Funny." Irene gave Willie his bottle back. "Okay, Beavis, let's see what we've got."

He fanned the light around. It showed several things: a small wooden floor white with pigeon shit, dirty canvas mailbags heaped all over each other, sparkling rain dripping off the steeple overhead, piles of empty envelopes, discarded letters and junk mail. "That son of a bitch," Irene murmured. "The whole time he was reading the town's mail."

"More than just this town," Martel said. The flashlight was shaking in his hand. "This is a federal offense, people. This is FBI material."

Irene shoved some bags aside. "Wally's dead, so don't shit your pants. What the hell is this?"

She dragged an army-green canvas bag into the light. Things inside poked in odd directions. Things clanked. Stenciled on the sides were black letters: *GI Joe's Army /Navy Surplus.*

"More light," she said, and untied the drawstring. Willie watched this, remembering again that clanking bag Wally had been dragging around. Irene took hold of the bottom and flapped the bag out.

Guns sluiced across the floor. Willie recognized an AK-47, an M-16 with a collapsible stock, a sawed-off shotgun, a huge and nasty-looking automatic pistol with a perforated black shroud around the barrel. Several smaller pistols, too. Best of all, an old army field jacket with half a dozen old-style pineapple hand grenades stuck to it with safety pins.

"Well, what do you suppose?" Irene said wonderingly.

"The post office," Martel said. "He was gonna take out the post office in Junction City."

Irene wagged her head. "Mad as a hatter, he was. Going to show

Cordelia the depth of his love, maybe."

Martel kicked at the bag. "No ammo? All these guns and no ammo?"

Irene nodded. "There's Wally Enfield for you. A day late and a dollar short."

"Shit." Martel prodded the bags with the business end of his shotgun; nothing but mail. "One thing's for sure," he said, and went into a squat. "Wally's better off dead." He put the flashlight on the floor and scooped up the field jacket. Grunting and straining, he put it on.

Irene snorted. His arms stuck out six inches below the sleeves. Zipping it would be impossible. He tore one of the grenades off and handed it to Willie. "Know how to operate these?"

Willie shrugged. "I've seen a billion war movies."

"Good enough. Let's go."

Irene grabbed his arm. "What about me, Roscoe? I get to walk around defenseless?"

He deliberated. "Irene, you're a woman. Women can't do these things."

She took a handful of his hair and jerked him down to the level of her mouth. "When you were crawling around in shitty diapers I was working graveyard at an iron foundry in Pennsylvania, mister hot shot lawman." She ripped a grenade from his new jacket and stuck a finger through the ring of the pin. "I pull this, throw it, and people-parts go flying. Right?"

He was grimacing. "Right."

She released him. "Now we shall go. Don't forget the flashlight."

"Roger," he said, and picked it up.

"Now march. Come on, Willie, we have to stick together."

"Right behind you," Willie said, but when they were out of sight he sank back down on the mailbags, wiped the nervous sweat from his brow, and went back to work on the bottle. The wind gusted coldly and the night was soggy with rain, but he was dry and off his feet, and most important, getting drunk all over again.

Despite the general view that Roach was dead, he was far from it. He was, in fact, feeling better right now than he had felt since this whole nasty night started. Doing the bumpo-grindo on Cordelia had been fun, except for the fact that she had been a flabby bitch who thought men adored her, and who in reality had been old enough to be his grandmother, by the way he reckoned it. He was feeling good because he was smarter than Brayker, and on top of being smarter he was

slicker than Brayker, as evidenced by the fact that Roach now had the key, and Brayker had it not. During the push-and-shove confrontation in the room, during which that dumbfuck deputy Martel had performed like a trained seal, Roach had executed a quick presto-chango. As he careened into Brayker, he swapped him his key for a substitute item that Roach certainly would not need anymore. In the pouch there now resided, instead of Brayker's dopey key, a surprise that would do no more damage to the Salesman or his revolting cronies than a powder puff. Too bad Roach wouldn't be there to see the expression on his face.

At this moment he was standing at the front door with wind and traces of rain whipping through the doorway. He did not know how to get in touch with the Salesman, but figured it wouldn't take long for the news to leak out that a pow-wow was in order. As he had come out of the room upstairs like a suicidal maniac, he had not been suicidal at all. He had seen what the key did to those stupid-looking, slow-moving rejects from a horror show. With it in his hand, he had pretty much stabbed his way through to the stairway. As they clawed his shirt and tore it from his body, he wondered if even the key was no match for these clowns; but they had suddenly begun to fall away like a flock of crows scared out of a cornfield. The Salesman knew which side of his toast to butter, and had somehow called them off, by means unknown. Telepathy? Mind control? Roach did not care if the message had come to them via Pony Express; all he knew was that they had vanished.

Now he stuck his head out the doorway. "Yo, Salesman?" he called out. "You out there?"

No response. Roach tried holding the key out like a beacon. "Salesman? I got what you want here."

Still nothing. Roach ground his teeth. Lightning stitched the sky not far away, and he counted the seconds until the thunder arrived, a childhood habit. "Oh, perfect," he grunted. "Eighteen miles away my ass. That was in the front goddamned yard." He examined the night. "Salesman! Yo!"

Two demons lurched out of nowhere and stopped at the door. Roach used the key in vampire-slayer fashion, backing up a step. "No, I want the head honcho," he said with his voice full of bravado. "Begone, dumbfucks."

The Salesman materialized between them, the best special effect Roach had seen since his last movie, which had been Godzilla doing something or other. His finances did not let him get out much; not the way Homer had paid wages at the Eureka Cafe.

"You rang," the Salesman intoned. He was wearing scruffy jeans and

a western-style shirt with a baseball cap snugged backward on his head. He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his scuffed old Reeboks. “Mind if I smoke?”

Roach stared at him. “Smoke away, Buford.”

“Thankee.” He pulled a red pack of Chesterfields out of his shirt pocket and dug out a battered old Zippo from the tattered pocket of his jeans. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke Roach’s way. It hit the line of the blood seal and split outward as if blown against a pane of glass. “You see my problem,” he said. “Country club taste with Moose Lodge income.”

“Ain’t that just a heartbreaker,” Roach said. “Now let’s deal.”

He smiled. “Deal away, Roachie.”

Roach matched his smile. “I’m willing to give you this key. From what I hear, you’ve been trying to get your hands on it for about two thousand years.”

“Give or take,” the Salesman admitted with a nod. “Call it a hobby.”

“There’s certain things I want, then. Number one, I want out of here.”

“Could be done.”

“And I want Jeryline with me.”

The Salesman’s eyes widened. “Why, you Romeo son of a bitch, you! I had no idea.”

“That’s only half of it, Buckwheat. I want a car.”

“Sheriff Tupper’s is up for grabs, I hear.”

Roach tapped the key against his teeth. “Not a cop car, dimwit. I want a ’Vette.”

“Brayker’s a veteran,” the Salesman said immediately. “World War Two. Deserted his unit, went to trial for treason after he spilled his guts to the Koreans. North Vietnam found him guilty of espionage for the PLO. Sentenced in Albania for war crimes in absentia.”

“He can be a hero all he wants to be,” Roach said. “But what I mean is a Corvette. Chevy makes it. I want it brand-new, no miles. Can you do that?”

The Salesman seemed to waffle. “I don’t know, really. Do you have a trade-in?”

Roach scrubbed a hand over his face. “We could use Tupper’s car, now that he’s dead.”

“Done deal. Is that it?”

Roach shook his head and glanced over both shoulders. “Money,” he whispered. “One million dollars, unmarked bills.”

The Salesman lowered his voice. “I can do that. I can do it all.

Deal?"

Roach's eyes jerked this way and that as he chewed his lip. He extended the key. "Deal."

The Salesman jerked backward. "Hold that thought," he said. He tossed his cigarette into the wind and stepped out of Roach's view. He reappeared with the wooden case in both hands. "Mind getting rid of that?" he asked, looking down at the base of the doorframe.

Roach looked down. "Hell, the blood's all dried up anyway. You won't get fried."

"Just to be sure. Please."

Roach shrugged, and scraped away the blot of dried blood with his foot. The Salesman probed the area with an elbow, then smiled and stepped inside. "Please insert the key," he said. "The passport to all your dreams."

Roach moved as if to put it inside, then snatched it back. He cocked his head and gave the Salesman a wink. "If you think I'm that stupid, think again," he said. "You've got all kinds of powers, but I don't think you can make a car out of thin air. Show me."

The Salesman grinned. "You've reestablished my faith in common sense," he said. "Step cut here and see all of my power."

Roach chuckled. "I don't think I'll be doing that, Roscoe. You just show me from here."

"Fine and dandy. Just step back a little and give me room to work."

Roach backed away, still holding the key out. "Do it to it," he said. "Show me my car."

The Salesman smiled. "There. All done."

Roach frowned. "I told you I ain't going outside to look, man. I want to see it in here."

"But it *is* in here, Roachie. Look up!"

Roach looked up. "Well I'll be," he said, staring at the underbelly of a Chevy Corvette so new that even the muffler was shiny as fresh steel. "What's holding it up?"

"I am," the Salesman said in a dead flat monotone.

The car dropped like the ton of metal and plastic it was. Roach barely had time to blink. The weight folded his spine in a hundred new directions, split his belly open and ejected most of his guts against the unused muffler. One arm still stuck out from under the right front fender, the Salesman walked over and held the key case under Roach's hand. It spasmed once and the key dropped neatly into the groove that had been cut for it so many centuries ago.

The Salesman regarded the lines of blood seeping across the floor.

“Asshole,” he said and headed upstairs.

19

Wallace Pickerford Gimley had barely settled himself among the mailbags when things got strange again. He had not known that bagged mail could be arranged into such good padding, and was thinking this while eyeing the remaining four inches of Thunderchicken in the bottle, when something soft lightly struck his cheek and caught his attention. He frowned and touched his face, came across something wispy lying across his shoulder, and followed its length down to the floor of the belfry. He picked up the strange object and stuck it under his eyes.

A little roll of thin pink paper. Confetti.

Light burst alive all around him. Music shot out of nowhere, lively tunes from the Forties, Guy Lombardo, Benny Goodman, Big Band numbers he had not heard in decades. Willie sat up straighter and jerked his head around, trying to pinpoint the source, his eyes wide and uneasy.

Something touched his knee. He jerked as if bee-stung, then softened. A beautiful woman in a drab green USO uniform was kneeling on the floor. She flattened both hands on his knee and perched her chin on her knuckles. "Won't the war ever end?" she asked plaintively, staring out into the night. "The boys have been gone so very long, and I'm so afraid of Hitler."

He was about to tell her the war had ended fifty years ago and she could shut her yap, when two more women came alive behind him and leaned over to tickle his ears. The scent of perfume rose up to compete with the gusting wind.

"We've missed you, Willie," both of them crooned in unison. "A good man is hard to find."

He was about to tell them a hard man is better to find, when yet another woman appeared. He nearly dropped his bottle. There was a lot of her and not much that wasn't covered, save for a wide silver ribbon running from her shoulder to her waist that proclaimed her Miss Nude USA 1995. "Willie!" she cried. "Willie!"

He was trying to think of something to say when someone nudged him. He jerked around and was looking at a waiter wearing a ruffled white shirt and a black bow tie. "Shall I remove that from you, sir?" he asked, indicating the bottle of T-bird with a look of distaste marring his features. "We do have house rules, you know."

Willie was about to protest, knowing full well that the DTs did all kinds of crazy things to a man but never yet had bought the next drink, when a huge voice blasted out of the air. The waiter snatched the bottle away and vanished.

“Drinks are on *my* tab!” the voice bellowed.

Willie avoided a coronary by concentrating on the direction of the voice: it was the Salesman. He was perched on the roof with a spotlight casting a circle around him, apparently the star of this unusual show. In one hand he held a clarinet. In the other, a microphone. “Willie baby!” he roared, and shot to his feet. How his shiny shoes avoided sliding him down the rain-slick shingles Willie could not imagine, except that in DTs people did all kinds of inventive things.

“Got one for ya, Willie,” he said, grinning and nodding to an audience that did not seem to be there. “There are these two traveling salesmen, see, and their car breaks down out in the middle of nowhere. So they walk to the nearest farmhouse, see, and . . . oh what the hell! What the hell! Salesman jokes! Everybody’s heard ’em! How about this—a horse walks into a bar. The bartender hands it a beer and says, ‘So, why the long face?’ ”

A snare drum snapped offstage. A cymbal was struck and immediately muted.

“I got a million of ’em,” the Salesman howled. “Check this out: did you hear about the Mexican identical twins? You couldn’t tell Juan from the other! Hah! Am I killing you yet?”

Uncle Willie burped, feeling nauseous again.

“Or this: hear about the religious chicken that joined a monastery? He wanted to be a fryer. Get it? Hah!”

The drum got slapped. The cymbal got hit and muted. Willie groaned.

“Hey, waiter!” the Salesman hollered, waving a finger. “Get that man the best in the house. The best! Hear me?”

The waiter made a reappearance, this time holding a chromed bucket of ice with a bottle poking out. “Will this do, sir?” he asked, bending low to show it. “It is the finest liquor we offer.”

Willie pulled it out of the ice. There was no label, no cork, no screw cap, no nothing. He raised it to his nose and took a whiff. It was not Thunderbird. Anything that was not Thunderbird was better than Thunderbird. “Mind if I take a sip?” he asked.

“Take all you want,” the waiter said.

Willie tipped the bottle back. Cool liquid slid down his throat, not quite yet available to his taste buds, the aroma not quite yet in his

sinuses, where true liquor tasting sessions were held. He heard the Salesman laugh, heard the snare drum snap and the cymbal crash.

"Wait'll I tell you the one about the town drunk who finally took his last drink," the Salesman said, suddenly serious, suddenly as grim as a surgeon stalking down a corridor with bad news for the family. "Just wait until I do."

Brayker froze in place. "What the hell was that?"

Jeryline stopped and listened. "What was what? What did it sound like?"

He rattled his head. "Like a bomb. Not that loud, but like that."

She took hold of his arm. They were in the kitchen, where at the open back door dismal streamers of confetti were soaking up the rainwater being pushed inside by the wind. Several dead demons, their ashen corpses blown into unrecognizable dark drifts, marred the floor. Jeryline had not heard anything, but easily believed that Brayker could sense things she couldn't.

"It came from out there," Brayker said, motioning backward toward the rest of the house. "I'll go see."

She released him. "Okay. I'll nose around here, check the cabinets. If Danny got scared, he might have hidden in one of them. Heck, I even would."

He touched his lips, frowning. "You know, we ought to stay together, really. The only thing we have now is the key, and we can't share it in two different places."

Jeryline took his arm again, hugged it. "I'm so glad you said that, Silas. I am so sick of being alone."

He looked at her with his face registering more changes than she could keep track of. Intuition hit her, or maybe just a realization. "You've been nothing but Brayker for a long, long time, haven't you? Not many people nowadays call you Silas."

He put on a smile. "Sometimes I forget I have that name. But at a time, back when I was young, it was common to use names that aren't popular now. Kids were named Silas and Mortimer and Poindexter and Englebert Humperdinck and—"

"Don't bullshit me," she said. *"Nobody* got named Mortimer."

"Exposed at last," he said, and hung his head. "I had my name legally changed from Mortimer to Englebert Humperdinck, but now must operate under the alias of Silas. The name isn't really Brayker; it's Fracture."

She chuckled. "This fatigue is giving us the giggles, Englebert. Let's

go see what your noise was."

They turned and pushed through the steel bat-wing doors together, smiles evaporating instantly at the sight of Sheriff Tupper's body. "It was over this way," he said, aiming her toward the parlor. "Sounded like a . . ."

Jeryline did not scream when she saw what was left of Roach; Brayker was grateful for that. The pile of meat stood no more than eight inches tall with shattered lengths of bone sticking out like birthday candles. His eyes had popped out and rolled a remarkable distance away, almost to the TV—shiny white discs that had been his spine had been squirted about like hockey pucks. Out of his soupy remains two perfectly good arms stuck out.

Jeryline spun and pressed her face into Brayker's chest. "Jesus," she whispered, "how could he get like *that?"*

"Don't know for sure," Brayker said. "Something fell on him, looks like."

They turned away from the mess. "Danny's dead," she said. "I know it for sure now."

"Yeah. Let's go back and find the others, hide in the room till daybreak."

She nodded wordlessly. They plodded up the stairway, no longer touching, their faces drawn. In Brayker's room were only four walls, a bed, a smashed dresser—no people. "They must be in the attic," Jeryline said. "But I don't like how quiet things are. We need to regroup."

Brayker motioned toward the door. "Martel said there was a stairway in Wally's old room. We can holler up at them."

She tweezed his sleeve between two fingers and followed him across the hall, cutting wide in front of her own door and the little bit of Paris inside. In Wally's room, Brayker led the way up the crude stairway, slowing as he reached the top. He looked back at her.

"This is no attic. It leads up to the belfry."

"So, anybody up there?"

Uncle Willie's voice suddenly blared over the top of Brayker's head, making him jerk back. "We got a whole lot of trouble up here!"

Brayker took the last few steps in one stride. Jeryline trotted up just behind, trying to look past him, seeing only darkness, hearing only the pounding of the rain.

Something made a cracking noise that she could not place. A second later Brayker slammed into her, knocking her against the waist-high guardrail so hard that her face caught a handful of raindrops. She pushed away just as Brayker, a dark shadow, rolled back up onto his

feet. Feeble lightning put on a distant, dismal show, but it was enough for her to see. Uncle Willie had a wicked-looking rifle in his hands, which he was holding like a club. His eyes were large and reddish, glowing from the inside.

"No!" she screamed, buckling to her knees. Uncle Willie, gentle, clumsy Uncle Willie, had given himself to the Salesman.

Crack! Brayker flopped backward with a groan. Jeryline crawled to him and pawed at his chest for the pouch. He sat up. Hot liquid dripped on her wrists. She got her hand around the key and ripped it free, jumped to her feet, and waited for Willie's next move.

But . . .

She used her free hand to feel the key, baffled. It had changed somehow, was thinner, had prongs sticking out of one end, like a fork with a big heavy handle.

She sensed Willie drawing closer, could dimly make out the tiny red dots of his eyes. He moved suddenly; something heavy whooshed through the air. She ducked, raised up, and attacked him with both hands around the haft of the strange new key. With a grunt she slashed down with it, driving it into the black shape of his face. Glowing white fluid spurted across her arms and chest in a thin spray, burning like acid. Willie howled and dropped the rifle. Brayker loomed at Jeryline's side and tussled once more with Willie. The old man fell over and performed a rapid flip-flop down the stairs.

"The key," Brayker panted. "Where are you?"

She guided it into his hands. "Something's wrong with it. It feels funny."

"Save that thought," he said, and thundered down the stairway. Jeryline followed. In the light she could see that Brayker was indeed holding a fork. It had a fat red handle. It was a Swiss Army knife.

A Swiss Army knife.

Uncle Willie was pushing himself upright. His white hair hung in greasy strings. His white beard poked out comically in all directions. Where his right eye had been was a shriveled hole dripping thick brown fluid down his cheek.

He charged at Brayker, who had injuries of his own. The rifle had split his scalp down the middle of his skull and an incredible amount of blood was running out of it, painting his face, painting his neck, staining his shirt with tentacles of shocking crimson. He whipped the Swiss Army knife up and embedded it into Willie's remaining eye. Hot white matter ejected in a spray, and he collapsed.

"You bastard!" Brayker howled at the ceiling. "Come and fight *me,* you chicken-shit son of a bitch!"

Jeryline wondered if he even knew his key had been replaced with an inferior model. Pale and gaunt with rage, he glanced up at her but did not seem to see her at all. He lurched toward the door. "Wait!" she cried out, and took the remaining steps in two great leaps. She caught up with him and jerked him around to face her. "You can't fight him with that!" she shouted in his face. "Look at it! It's nothing but a goddamned *fork!"*

He jerked as if to shove her away, his eyes large and glittering. Slowly they cleared a bit; he raised the Swiss Army knife up and shifted his gaze to look at it. A smear of the white stuff was blackening between the tines.

"Ha-ha," he said in dreadful tones. "Roach did it after all."

Something clattered downstairs. Jeryline hurriedly pushed him back to his own room, not knowing if the blood seal was any good now, not knowing much of anything, except that to face the Salesman with a glorified fork was suicide.

"Sit and listen to me," she said. His knees unhinged and he dropped onto the bed. The Swiss Army knife thumped to the floor. "This is your own plan talking here, Brayker. We sit tight until morning. We don't leave this room even to take a shit. We only have to wait until—oh shit, what time is it?"

He raised an arm and regarded his wrist. "It's gone," he said. "Or did I have one on when I got here?"

"We'll say it's two thirty, maybe three o'clock. The sun rises about five thirty or six. Two hours to go, three tops."

Brayker cranked his head up to look at her. "He's got the key now. Roach took it from me and gave it to him."

She nixed the idea immediately. "If that's what happened Roach wouldn't be dead. Besides, if the Salesman has the key, why hasn't the world ended? Why would he still be hanging around in Wormwood at all?"

Brayker applied an emotionless grin to his face. "Because he wants me. I have eluded him for about seventy-five years, and I'm not high on his list of favorite people."

Jeryline went to the head of the bed and snatched up the pillow, shook it out of the pillowcase, and tossed the pillowcase over to him. "Wipe your face off," she said. "You've quit bleeding, but you're still gruesome." She went back and began to pace at the foot of the bed, her fingers intertwined behind her back. "Okay, Watson, check this out. The Salesman has it, all he wants now is your hide. Can he cancel a blood seal with the key?"

Brayker shook his head as he scrubbed his face. "He can't even

touch it until all the blood is gone from the orb. And do you still recall how much was left?"

"I do," she said. "Next to nothing. But he still can't touch it, so it has to be lying around someplace."

"Inside the case he brought. Don't forget the case."

She made fists, then interlaced her hands again. Five paces, turn, five paces, turn. This could become a habit. "So he still needs one of us to empty out the last drop. He can't use pot holders or anything, right? Right. So he must keep one of us alive to do it for him."

"Not necessarily you or me," Brayker said. "Anybody he can find."

"But it's late," she said. "He's in Wormwood, apparently everybody and their grandma has become a demon here, and that leaves us. You, me, that fucknuts deputy, and Irene. Everyone else is dead."

"We can assume that, yeah."

She stopped pacing. "So then, I have a plan. You and I are going to arrange a truce with the Salesman."

He held the pillowcase out and made strange faces.

"Are we being bugged here?" she asked, toning down her voice. "Can he listen in?"

Brayker shrugged. "You're asking the ant what the anteater will do next. All I know is to duck and run and never stop when he's around."

"Forget that then. I say we stay put until sunrise."

"So do I."

She frowned. Somehow they had reached an agreement without solving anything. "So," she said, and dropped down on the bed to sit beside him. "Ever played charades?"

He started to smile, then spun his head around. Jeryline turned to follow his eyes, her heart plummeting, having no idea what disaster might strike next, but assuming that since it was unexpected, it had to be a disaster nevertheless.

Danny Long was standing in the doorway with his mouth wide open in a terrific yawn. He rubbed his eyes and looked at Jeryline. "I can't find my mom and dad," he said. "And I'm scared of the monsters."

Jeryline stood. "Aw, you poor baby. Come here and let me hold you."

He looked back down the hallway, his lower lip pooched out as he got ready to cry. "Go with me," he said. "Please go with me."

Brayker touched her arm. "Make him walk through."

She saw sense in that. She sat on the bed again and extended her arms. "I'll help you, Danny," she crooned. "Come here and give me a hug."

He looked fretfully at her. “Some guy got smashed on the floor down there,” he said. “He smells like poop.”

“Just come in here, and then we’ll go,” she said, and got up again. “Come on.”

“What if my mom got smashed too? What if my dad’s still down in the tunnel with his head bleeding? Please come with me.”

She looked at Brayker. undecided. Danny was just a little kid who’d seen far too much tonight, was half out of his mind from the force of these recent tragedies. “We have to wait for morning,” she told him, still keeping her distance. “Come stay with us in here.”

He gave her a long, tearful look, turned his head to look at the stairway, and took a faltering step. Jeryline glanced down at Brayker. He was slowly scrubbing a hand over his face, looking as old as he probably was.

“Danny,” she pleaded, “don’t go. Everything will be better in the morning.”

He wiped his nose with his sleeve, tired and seeming at the point of collapse. He slowly walked out of sight.

“Shit,” Jeryline said under her breath. “I can’t take this anymore.”

Brayker heard her. “Don’t do it,” he said. “Not until he comes through the door.”

She hesitated, torn in half by her common sense and her emotions. She went to the door and peeked around it. Danny was still going, dragging his feet and sobbing. She saw that one of his shoes was untied. It was a pitiful enough sight to break the deadlock. “I’ll just bring him back here,” she said to Brayker. “Nothing can happen.”

He shook his head, then bent down and fished the Swiss Army knife off the floor. He held it out to her. “If he turns on you,” he said, “stab out his eyes. You have to do it fast and without feeling, and then run. Can you do that?”

She accepted it. “I guess I can.”

“No guessing,” he said. “And no hesitation. Promise me.”

She smiled an affirmation, then went out of the room. “Hold up,” she called to Danny, and he stopped. Once beside him, she dropped to her knees and took hold of his shoulders. “I want you to listen,” she said, turning him to face her. “There’s nothing we can do about your mom and dad right now. We’re going to go back into that room and you are going straight to bed. I can even tell you a story.”

His eyelashes were sparkling with fresh tears. Without warning he jerked out of her grasp and scurried down the stairway. Jeryline jumped to her feet. “Danny!”

“Mommy,” he wailed. “Where are you? Daddy?”

She clenched her eyes shut. This was horrible, she was not equipped to handle situations as horrible as this, she wanted to go to bed and dream herself away from here. But only a miracle had saved Danny's hide the last time he went on his own. This time he would surely die.

"Stop!" she shouted, and chased after him, taking the steps two at a time. At the bottom she caught sight of him headed straight for the trapdoor to the basement. Up and behind her, Brayker shouted her name into the hallway.

"Danny, *please!"* she hollered at his back. "Stop and listen to me!"

He stopped at the point where Martel had broken all the jars. The assorted jellies on the floor had been smashed and tracked in a dozen directions by the horde of demons the basement had disgorged. Jeryline skidded to an unsteady halt and turned him around.

"Upstairs," she said, breathing hard. "No more running."

He looked up at her. A grin curved his mouth up at the corners. He pointed a finger in her face and she realized with a jolt of horror that the fingernail was round and sharp, a talon the color of mustard.

"You're right, Jerry," he wheezed, blowing the stench of bloody ruin in her face. "There will be no more running at all."

She started to turn with a shout for Brayker already forming inside her lungs when she saw that she and Danny were no longer alone.

"Meet my new pals," Danny chortled. "Too bad we don't have time for introductions."

She felt her mind graying out. No introductions were needed in this sudden ring of demons. Though each one looked different, they were all cut from the same mold: the Salesman's mold.

She dropped to the floor just as they sprang at her.

20

Though it looked like Diamond County Deputy Sheriff Bob Martel had lost supreme command of the freedom fighters to Irene Galvin, he had not lost the whole battle, not by a long shot. Currently Irene had him slogging around outside in the rain on some kind of search-and-destroy mission in the yard. After coming down from the steeple they had checked in all the rooms and found no one, which Martel interpreted as meaning everybody else was dead. But no, Irene insisted that in such a big place as the Mission Inn there were lots of good hiding spaces. She did not seem to realize that Brayker was content to blow the whole night cowering in Room Five, and apparently Jerry as well. Suddenly now they were gone, Room Five was empty, and Uncle Willie had not bothered to come down from the security of the steeple. The smell of death hung in every noseful Martel inhaled, and with every minute that dragged by it was looking like he and Irene were the sole survivors.

But what had enticed Brayker and Jerry out of the room? During the short time Irene and he were gone catching Uncle Willie in what was supposed to be an attic, those two took off. Were they downstairs now? Were they in the steeple now? Was Brayker a lying son of a bitch, a county official who planned this whole terrible episode just to put a certain deputy to the test before either firing him or promoting him?

Martel's head ached with questions. The undersized field jacket was horrifically tight on him, the rain pounding his head felt like a hail of cold buckshot, he was hungry and needed to see the blood of these demons to renew his warrior's spirit. He had no doubt that he would be killing them all soon, if Irene would ever stop ordering him around like a general. His silly mission now was to circle the building to look for Danny, as if the kid actually made it out here into the rain and decided to hunker down and be miserable all night. And now it seemed that the flashlight wanted to order a midnight snack of new batteries, the once-mighty white beam yellowing and getting soft.

There was a clump of former hedges at the northwest corner of the building and Martel dutifully stuck the barrel of the shotgun inside the nest of crumbling branches to pull it apart. What? No Danny curled up inside? The proper authorities would hear of this! Especially since the Proper Authority here consisted of Deputy Martel and no one else.

He continued his tour around the building. Someone had left a tattered white T-shirt in the mud. Call the FBI, for God's sake. Beyond it, something that looked suspiciously like a dog turd loomed squatly on the ground. The CIA must be told of this. Around the next corner he ran across a tumbleweed that had become soggy and was unable to tumble anymore. He stomped it to a pile of pointy little twiglets while using a mental clipboard to remind himself to phone the President with this ghastly news.

And then he was back at the same kitchen door Irene had forced him out of. She was inside, scooping up wet ashes with a dustpan, looking lumpy and green in her clothes, like a big mutated frog. How he hated her.

"Nothing, huh?" she said as he came in. Then, in less than the time it takes a real frog to perform one hop, she popped up on her feet and aimed the dustpan at him. "Hold it right there!" she shouted.

He held it right where she wanted it. "Huh?"

"You could be the Salesman all over again!"

"I ain't no Salesman," he growled at her while water drained out of his clothing to form a widening pool under his shoes. "I'm Bob Martel and I'm the Deputy Sheriff."

She pressed her chin down toward her breastbone, eyeing him fiercely in a classic pose of mistrust. Her single grenade was hooked to the waistband of her slacks, and now one hand went down to touch it. "Prove it," she demanded.

Bob Martel spluttered and fumed. "Goddammit, Irene! I'm who I am!"

Her eyes grew narrower. "And who might that be?"

He propped the shotgun against the wall, quite willing by now to unhook a hand grenade from his new coat and blow her stupid ass, and the stupid rest of her, off the face of the earth. "Irene," he said in tightly measured words, "with Sheriff Tupper dead, I am the man in charge here. I also have grenades in easy reach. You may think you are the newest thing since Dairy Queen invented ice cream, but I am here to tell you it ain't so. Got that?"

She rolled her eyes. "So sue me. Come on in, Bob. I just had to be sure."

He deflated to his normal, un-angry size. "Christ, we need a code word," he complained. He stuck the flashlight into his holster. "You call me something, I call you something different."

She bent down and resumed collecting wet ashes. "Fine. You call me Irene, I'll call you shit-for-brains."

"Not funny, Irene. We'll do it this way. Your code-name will be, uh,

Frog Lady."

"Frog Lady?"

"Something the Salesman could never know, see? And I'll be, uh . . ."

"Stuporman. Nah, he'd guess that right off the bat."

"Not funny again. I'll be Gunbelt. How's that? Can you remember it?"

She nodded. "Gumby. No problem."

He ground his teeth. "Anyhow, Danny's not outside."

"All right, then. Now go check the basement."

He eyed her warily. "You want *me,* alone, in the *basement?* Suppose it's still crawling with demons down there? Do you want me dead? Is that it?"

She thought for a moment. "You're right, Gumby. A slow death would be better."

He retrieved the shotgun and strode past her. "Screw you," he muttered. "When you hear my grenades going off down there, you'd better not be standing above where I throw them."

"Just straddle the sucker and knock on the ceiling before she blows," she said. Martel knocked the bat-wing door apart with one fist, hesitated, and pushed his way back through.

"Forget it," he said. "No way am I going down there."

Irene rose up with the dustpan heaped full of ashes, and crossed to the trashcan beside the prep table. "Then at least go back up and drag Willie's drunken ass down here." She dumped the ashes inside it, regarded the dustpan, then set it aside. "These suckers stink just as bad dead as they did alive. I'll let Willie finish."

She looked back over to Martel. "Going to stand there all day? Get moving!"

"No," he said. He had worked a long, long shift and was too tired to play her games anymore. "I'm the cop here, and I go where I tell myself to."

She leaned against the prep table and passed a hand tiredly over her hair, looking old and worn out. "Whatever. One of those demons is probably belching up Danny-burps even as we speak, so call off the search. Myself, I'm staying right here. Yourself, you can go where you please."

Martel squared his shoulders; his authority had been established at last. "Fine, then. I will now go out to Tupper's cruiser and retrieve the box of shotgun shells I know is in there."

He started for the back door, but turned when Irene called to him.

“Now what?” he demanded.

She raised two fingers. “Before you risk life and limb for a box of shotgun shells, you should ask yourself two questions.”

He sighed. “What two questions?”

“Number one: why not use the front door?”

“Any trained combat fighter could tell you that,” he retorted nastily. “My last patrol just now ended at the rear. Walking out the front door would be a blind approach. By coming at the enemy from the side I have the advantage of surprise. Next?”

“Number two,” she said, “if you can make it to the car, why don’t you drive over the lawn to the front steps, open a door, and *pick me up so we can get the fuck out of here?!”*

He blinked. Good idea. He had tried it once before and almost lost his life to the demons, but now he was better at this survival thing, was a seasoned veteran not afraid of webbed claws and bloated faces with long yellow fangs. “I’ll honk,” he said. “You stay close till you hear it, then run like hell out the front.”

She perked up, losing her permanent sneer for a moment. “Do you suppose it might work?” she asked him. “After tonight this place is going to have a reputation so bad nobody or their dog will ever room here again. And I’ve got insurance—I could torch it on the way out.”

Martel made shush-up motions by touching his lips. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, Irene.”

She went sour again. “Once a flatfoot, always a flatfoot. Just honk when you’re ready.”

He tipped her a wink and went out. The rain had become a permanent fixture and pounded him without mercy as he peered this way and that. The whole world smelled like mud and rain, rain and mud. Crouching, he prowled along the perimeter of the Mission Inn’s unattractive back yard, not needing the flashlight because during the last patrol he had committed the layout of the area to memory. Something snagged his foot without warning and tightened around his ankle, jerking him off balance. As he splashed down he was already kicking at it, a demon hand that peeled his shoe off and went for his other foot. Martel groaned and backpedaled, hearing hisses and grunts amid the pounding of the rain against the ground. He kicked away the last demon finger and scrambled to his feet with his breath wheezing furiously in and out. Rather than run he whipped the flashlight out of its holster while raising the shotgun at the same time.

In the uncertain beam, he saw Irene’s goddamned garden hose had been haphazardly piled instead of neatly coiled. The brass squirt nozzle was pointing up at the sky. “Cocksucker,” he growled and

kicked it. Wrong foot: no shoe. He hopped and danced, cursing. When he was sworn in as Sheriff, his first act, he decided, would be to outlaw uncoiled hosiery.

Eventually he moved on after an unsuccessful search for his shoe. At the side of the building he paused in a deep crouch, his eyes raking the area, checking the town beyond for lights, of which there were a few. He did not stare directly at these, however, having been taught in the army never to look directly at a light in the night because some kind of stuff inside the eyeballs called visual purple was depleted by light. He rose up, feeling well-trained and crafty. Immediately he stepped onto something slick, nearly losing his balance. The aroma of dog shit rose from his remaining shoe. Cursing again, he marched straight for the police cruiser, tired of the whole affair. Clearing a gallon of crumbled glass off the driver's seat, he dropped himself inside.

About everything that could be broken was broken. He felt for the keys in the steering column, but they were mysteriously gone. He had been dragged from the car by a monster, of course, but had no memory of pocketing the keys. He felt the seat, looked on the dash, opened the glove box. No keys and no shells.

He bent down and touched at the floor. Keys jangled. He smiled and fished them up. The car's key ring held only two keys, the ignition and the trunk. The trunk key was there as it should be, but Martel's smile became a frown. The head of the ignition key was there, but the bottom part was broken off.

He cranked to the side and peeked into the keyhole. It was occupied. He tried turning the whole switch but it only moved slightly back and forth. He poked the broken head at it, but no luck. He slumped back against the seat and let his eyes fall shut. The story of his life: from one fuckup to another.

He opened his eyes. Rain was blowing through the shattered windshield. The moon was a lighter spot in the low ceiling of black clouds. What a night, he thought dismally. What a life.

"It's a fucking pig!" someone roared in his left ear. He turned with a gasp. A long-haired hippie was crouched beside the car wearing beads and chains and one of those Tonto headbands. His clothes were tie-dyed monstrosities of purple and pink and green. A burning marijuana joint was hanging from his lips. His eyes, angry and full of hate, gleamed behind the purple lenses of his granny glasses. "Pig!" he shouted in Martel's face. "Death to pigs!"

He stuck a revolver against Martel's nose. It was wet and muddy. It was Martel's own long-lost police special.

"Four dead in Ohio," the hippie snarled at him. "Tin soldiers and

Nixon coming. We're finally on our own."

He fired. The back of Martel's head blew apart. Gore slashed across the rear window in a meaty spray. He collapsed across the seat.

The hippie jerked Martel's body out of the car and dragged it a few feet away, then stood in the rain, changing, always changing. He tore one of the grenades off the field jacket, stepped past Martel with his feet crunching slowly over the gravel, and got into the car. It started right up.

Irene heard it honk. Her eyebrows arched up with surprise. She pushed through the bat-wing doors, smelling something in the air but not concerned about it, ignoring everything but the front door and what might lay beyond. As she pulled it open, a small hurricane of wind rushed through. Squinting, she peered into the dark.

The police car was right at the foot of the steps. Her mind suddenly tangled up. Should she really torch the place? No, of course not. Should she tell Martel just to come back in, we've gotta find Danny? Or should she just plain leave and see what developed later?

She decided that her hide was of great value. The only cop here was leaving, so why shouldn't she? She pulled the door shut and waddled across the small porch, protecting her eyes from the rain, went down the steps, and got into the car, which Martel had conveniently opened for her from the inside.

"Better buckle up," he said when her door had slammed shut. His buttons and badges gleamed softly in the dark. "It could be a crazy ride."

"With you driving, I'm sure it will be," she said, and buckled up.

Martel, a shape in the blackness, handed her a grenade. "Hold onto this, will you? There's one last thing I want to check."

She accepted it and he got out. She shook her head. All of creation was out trying to kill anything that moved and he was ambling away, probably to take a piss on her lawn. She shifted the grenade in her hands, thinking of throwing it out at him just to scare the piss out faster.

Something was wrong with it. The handle thing was missing. She felt for the pin. It was gone.

"Jesus!" she whispered, and dropped the grenade between her thighs. She assaulted the buckle of her seat belt. It was stuck, even kind of hot, as if it had been welded shut. She furiously cranked her window down and snatched up the grenade, cocked her arm back to throw, but never finished.

The exploded remains of the car burned for an hour, despite the



rain. By then the Mission Inn was burning as well, leaving a mystery that would never be solved.

21

Maybe he was old, and surely he was tired, but Brayker was no fool. As soon as he heard those lightly scampering footsteps tromp down the stairs, he knew that Jeryline was being lured away from him. He got off the bed and slipped to the doorway, his guts tightening, his face hard and determined. Jeryline was just now going down the last few steps, calling to Danny, and Brayker came dangerously close to shouting at her. But he had learned that the best tactic with the Salesman was sometimes to stand back and observe. The Salesman did not care if Jeryline lived or died, now that he owned the key. It was Brayker's blood that he wanted to see flow, not hers.

And so Brayker hung back, edging along the wall, then dropping to crawl on his belly to the top of the stairs. It was a dismal fact that he had no weapons left. All that remained was his mind and his courage and the decades of experience that had saved him from uncountable scrapes. He craned his head, squinting into the semidarkness, listening intently.

He heard a car honk outside. Brayker frowned. In less than five seconds he saw Irene barge through the bat-wing doors and hustle down the hallway that led to the front entrance, appearing quite nervous and distraught. He frowned some more. Things had been going on among the others of which he had no knowledge, but it was unavoidable. Martel was a walking recruiter for the mean green machine and Irene was a bossy space cadet. Together they couldn't do more than sass each other. What they had in mind this time was a riddle that might never be solved.

He began to slip down the stairs. Midway down he stopped. Someone had spoken, either Jeryline or Danny. He realized that Irene had passed probably within twenty feet of Jeryline and Danny without seeing, probably thanks to the poor light and Irene's distress. It was nearly comical: this church of the damned had become a maze where people roamed hither and yon without getting anywhere. If Martel and Irene could finally escape, though, more power to them. He would not hold it against them that they had left Jeryline and him here to die.

He moved on down to the bottom of the stairway. Two things happened at once as he crouched behind the posts of the handrail. One, Danny spoke again and things in that direction began to thump

and pound, as if Jeryline were being beaten. Two, a huge, thundering explosion shot the entire front door, frame, hinges, and all, through the hallway like a flat missile, while numerous panes of glass at the front of the building shattered and belched, sparkling shards across the floor and carpets. The traveling door smashed the front desk to pieces, wobbled on edge, and keeled over like a dead man. The desk started to burn. Dust clouded the air, making it hard to breathe, impossible to see.

Brayker rested his head on the handrail. Martel and Irene had bought the farm in a spectacular way. If Brayker had been creeping past the hallway just then, the amazing flying door would have killed him as well. Strange how fate worked. If he had not been in the same army battalion as Stephen Harrison, he would never have received the key, never have known about it at all, and been dead of old age now anyway. Go figure the weird workings of the universe.

He raised his head and crawled through the dust and rubble, using it as a screen, getting splinters of wood gouged into his hands, and crunching rocks of plaster under his kneecaps. A memory struck: Flanders field, where poppies now grow, and a barrier of barbed wire he had crawled across in the commotion and terror of a huge battle. All of his comrades in that war were dead now. The rest of this night would determine if he would join them at last.

As the haze began to clear under the gusting of wind through shattered windows, Brayker saw that a pack of demons was staggering around, disoriented by the blast and the dust. Little Danny stood over Jeryline, holding her face to the floor with one hand pressing the back of her neck. He had become mottled and white in the dust; Jeryline's hair and jeans had turned old and gray. Brayker got to his feet and lunged for her, but a vicious, incredibly strong backhand from Danny sent him smashing into the closet where the basement entrance lay. He recovered and crawled out, raking his hands across broken glass, slipping and squirming in the spilled jelly while a line of blood dripped out his nose and streaks of red and green light swooped across his vision.

"I don't know why I do these things," Danny said, but with a voice that had never belonged to an eight-year-old kid; it was the voice of a demon that had the vocal power to do more than hiss and gobble. He stepped back from Jeryline. She pushed herself up on her hands, shaking, drooling. Danny kicked upward into the middle of her face. It was a terrific blow that lifted her up and off her feet. As she crashed down, Brayker got himself upright. A demon surged up behind him, this one sporting an eye in the middle of its bloated forehead. Brayker turned long enough to jab a finger into that yellow eye; his finger sunk to the last knuckle and thin white fluid shot across his arm,

smoking where it ate through his sleeve. The demon dropped like a large wounded fish.

Jeryline staggered to her feet. The Swiss Army knife was still in her fist. Brayker advanced on Danny, who spun and extended his taloned fingers, his mouth stretching wide into a nasty leer. Brayker feigned a simple punch. Jeryline charged up behind Danny and stabbed the fork into the back of his neck. With a grunt he shambled around in a circle and cuffed her away. She landed on her butt and skidded a few feet.

"Bitch!" Danny roared.

Brayker jerked the fork out of Danny's neck. Four lines of blood squirted briefly. "Run!" Brayker shouted at Jeryline.

Danny lurched around. Brayker rammed the fork into his right eye and pulled it quickly out. Hot fluid jetted. The smell of hot varnish welled up in the form of thin black puffs of smoke from the floor. Brayker drew back again but a huge demon hand clubbed his arm with the force of a sledge hammer. Both the bones inside his forearm snapped wetly and his arm canted at a grotesque, impossible angle. The Swiss Army knife hit the floor and spun away.

The demon clamped its huge webbed paws on Brayker's shoulders and heaved him across the room. He smashed into the remains of the front desk, which were now on fire as well.

Jeryline was up again, on her hands and knees now, scrabbling for the knife. She got her fingers around it and rose onto her knees.

"You killed my mommy and daddy," Danny growled, standing in front of her with his ruined eye still pulsing fluid. "Now I'm killing *you!*"

His hand snapped out quick as an angry wasp and captured the knife. He tore it from her and held the bloody tines at the tip of her nose. Brayker sat up groggily, parts of his hair smoldering. As he tried to stand, a slat of wood broke under his weight and he dropped back down, jarring his broken arm. An unwanted scream squirted between his teeth. He moved his hand and felt something different than just wood or chunks of plaster.

He picked up the unexpected thing and held it before his eyes. A battered old butterfly knife. *His* battered old butterfly knife that he had not seen since being frisked by Sheriff Tupper so many nightmares ago. He snapped it open, no novice with a knife, and sighted in on Danny.

It was too far to throw accurately, especially for his left arm. "Hey!" he shouted in desperation. "Kid!"

Danny's head popped up. Brayker saw Jeryline go for the hand that held the Swiss Army knife and its ridiculous eating utensil. Brayker

scuttered forward across the debris, sighting in again, knowing it would never work.

Jeryline's hand flashed up; the knife/fork was in it. Without any heroics, she poked it almost gently into Danny's other eye. The demon inside Danny Long shrieked. She scurried to the side to avoid the gush of whatever evil thing that had done this to him, to Cordelia, to Uncle Willie.

Brayker worked himself back on his feet as Danny dropped to the floor. His broken arm was a crushing vise of pain, but it would get even worse as the shock wore off and his body began to fully understand what had been done to it. Jeryline had risen also and was menacing the demons with the Swiss Army knife. They seemed remarkably tamer; Brayker had long ago guessed that since they were products of the same Hell, there was a sort of commonality of mind, like one identical twin feeling the pain of the other. Or some such. At this moment he did not give a damn if the slow, stupid bastards felt better when one or all of them took a well-deserved shit. They were backing off and Jeryline was still alive.

He motioned to her. "Come on, quick! We have to get back upstairs!"

She loped toward him. Danny's kick had left the imprint of the eyelets and shoelaces of his Nikes on her forehead and blood was running from both nostrils, but her nose didn't seem broken. Together they scrambled over the rubble, coughing in the rising smoke as the fire steadily spread itself. "No, stop," she panted, pressing the back of her hand to her nose. "If this place keeps burning, we'll be trapped."

"We're trapped anyway," he said, grunting against the pain. He stuck the butterfly knife in a pocket and held his arm to his chest to keep the bones from grating against each other. "The key's gone, everybody's dead, I fucked up royally this time. You go ahead and run, run as fast as you can, the Salesman doesn't want you anyway."

"Nuh-uh, Brayker. Maybe he doesn't want me, but I want him. I hated my life in this dump, but it doesn't mean I hated the people. He killed the only family I had left, maybe the only real one I've ever had. So *you* go, *you* run."

He put on a bit of a smile. "I don't think so, Englebert."

She matched his expression. "Then it's just you and me, Humperdinck."

Now, from ahead: clapping. Brayker and Jeryline looked.

"Oh, bravo!" the Salesman said, walking down the stairs, slapping his hands slowly, steadily. He was wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. His cumberbund was a wonderful red, his thin gloves neat and white. Around his neck hung a small set of opera glasses on a black cord. The

battered old case for the key was tucked under his arm. “Even Shakespeare would be weeping now,” he said. “Such drama, such heroism, such tragedy, such pathos. I am almost literally in tears. Bravo.”

Jeryline squared her jaw. “You’ve got what you want, you bastard. Now at least be human enough to let us go.”

“Human?” He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, tipped back his head, and laughed. “Human? Mr. Fracture, would you mind telling the young lady that I do not take kindly to such insults?”

“He’s not human,” Brayker said. He groaned and dropped slowly to his knees, cradling his arm, grimacing. “Run, Jeryline,” he rasped. “He only wants me.”

“Wrong,” the Salesman blared. “You, Brayker, are history that will soon be forgotten. Our little Jeryline, on the other hand, seems the perfect person to continue the line of robbers and thugs who have kept my key from me so long. In fact, Brayker, I’m in such a good mood at squelching this line of thieves, that you may go.”

Brayker widened his eyes. “You’re kidding.”

He made sweeping motions with his fingers. “Beat it before I change my mind, asshole.”

Brayker found the strength to wobble upright again. He looked at Jeryline, took a long, quavering breath, and crossed in front of her.

She watched him with wide eyes. “Silas,” she said, “I can’t do this alone.”

He shrugged his shoulders, his face twisted with pain. “I’m old, Jerry, too old and too tired, Jerry. Forgive me.”

The Salesman wrinkled his nose. “Pathetic, isn’t it?”

Jeryline made fists. “You bastard!” she cried as he limped away. “You brought all this death here and you can just walk away from it? From me?”

He said nothing. The Salesman became interested in the ceiling, tapping his foot impatiently.

“I hate you!” she screamed. “Hate you *bad!”*

Brayker said nothing. She turned her attention to the Salesman. “I’ll do whatever you want,” she said in the high, wavering tones of panic. “When I’m cleaned up I’m a real pretty girl, and I know some tricks that’d even make Cordelia blush. I just don’t want to . . . die. Not here, not now.”

He eyed her, his mouth twitching at the edges. “Whiners,” he said disgustedly. “Want some cheese with that whine?”

She moved toward him, lifting her feet high to avoid being burned by the spreading patches of flame.

“Drop that knife!” he demanded.

She let it fall. Brayker was still making his slow, hunchbacked way to the door. “Hold me,” she said to the Salesman. “Please hold me.”

He put a finger under her chin, and smiled at her very fatherly. “You are the worst actress I have ever seen,” he said gently, and moved his hand to clamp it around her throat. “But I know you have the soul of a warrior, the spirit of ten men.” He hoisted her up. “Show me who you really are.”

“I’m a—I’m a—” She could barely push air through her windpipe as he lifted her.

“A warrior,” he said. “Tell me you are a warrior!”

She was able to shake her head slowly back and forth. “I’m a—I’m a—*diversion!”*

The Salesman’s eyes grew slightly bigger and his head snapped to her right. In that instant, magically, a small knife punched through his eye and embedded itself into the socket with only the slightest bit of sound: metal grating through bone. The butterfly handle bobbed lazily up and down, clicking.

He dropped her and reeled backward. The old case fell from under his arm and thumped on the floor. She snatched it up as he crashed against the wall. “Upstairs!” Brayker shouted as he ran toward her. “It’s the only place we know for sure is sealed!”

She levered herself dazedly back onto her feet, clutching her throat. She took a step and immediately fell again. The case banged on the floor and jumped from her hand. The Salesman jerked the knife out of his eye with a roar of anger and tottered toward the case with both gloved hands tinted an odd orange color by his blood. Brayker dived for it, landed on it, and rolled over with his broken arm flopping in crazy directions.

“MINE!” the Salesman roared, and slashed out with the knife. Brayker blocked it with the case, nearly losing it as the knife sliced through the old leather, trying to push himself away with his feet while still on his back. The Salesman lumbered another step and hacked at him again. This time the shiny blade punched into his stomach just below his ribcage. Brayker gasped. The Salesman raked it downward a few inches, then became tangled in Brayker’s feet. He fell.

Jeryline rose and ran shakily to Brayker. “Oh, God,” she groaned at the widening oval of blood on his shirt. She helped him get to his feet and together they stumbled to the staircase. The Salesman bellowed indecipherable things, strange words in alien tongues. Jeryline lifted Brayker when he fell, pulled on him when his strength was gone, screamed in his face when his eyes tried to fall shut. Out of weapons,

out of time, out of hope, she got him to the landing, and dragged him into the room, not even knowing anymore if it was sealed or not.

But at least, she knew, they had the key.

But she also knew that it was empty.

She heard the Salesman start up the stairs.

22

She eased Brayker down on the bed, thinking out of old habit that Irene would kill her for messing up the sheets with all this blood. He lay flat on his back, his broken arm over his chest, his uninjured arm over the gaping slash in his belly. He looked somehow yellow, maybe even green. He seemed to be ageing even as she watched, the skin of his face becoming thin and papery, tightening on the bones of his skull.

The case was still in his left hand. She pulled it away and flipped the crusty old latches that had been made, she had no doubt, more than two thousand years ago. Holding the key up to the light, she looked through the foggy quartz of the orb for a sign that enough blood existed inside to seal at least one more door.

She shook it, slapped it against her palm. Impossible to tell. A shadow blotted the doorway and she looked over. The Salesman stood there, still in high hat and tuxedo. One of his eyes was a crusted slit; the other was large and yellow with a thin pencil-point of a pupil that spoke of many deaths, many crimes.

“You’re going to die, you know,” he said. “And Brayker? Didn’t I show you what would happen to Brayker? Look at him now, and know my power.”

“The only thing powerful about you,” she said, advancing to the doorway, “is your breath.” She shoved the key at his face, making him lurch backward a step. “Sealed or not sealed?” she said. “Shall I pull you through to join me?”

“Give me the key,” he hissed at her. “Give it to me and I will let you live.”

She eyed him incredulously. “You are the biggest fucking liar I have ever met,” she said. “You say one thing and do the other. You promise things, and they never come true.”

“Of course,” he said, touching a gloved finger to his cheek. “That is why I am called the Salesman.”

“Well,” she said, twisting the orb open and grinning at him, “from now on let’s call you dead meat.”

She aimed it in his direction and snapped her hand. A few tiny droplets slipped out of the hole in the orb, two or three of them hitting his face. He squealed and shied away. There was a

disappointingly small wisp of smoke here and there, nothing spectacular.

"I'll burn you out," he growled. "A key made of iron and quartz don't burn, Jerry, but human flesh sure as hell does."

A part of her mind fully expected him to become a bat and fly away. Things were too crazy, everything was unreal. Instead he turned and walked to the stairs, muttering to himself like a disgruntled golfer who'd missed an easy putt. He stepped down and walked out of sight.

Jeryline turned and slumped against the wall. Brayker had been right. Staying in this room is what they all should have done from the beginning. But now, with the fire, even that option was disappearing.

"Jeryline?"

She raised her head. Somehow he had worked himself up to the headboard and was propped against it, looking worse with each passing second. She walked to him on legs that felt bloated and weak. Already a small circle of blood was forming on the threadbare carpet as it dripped from the bedspread with small tapping noises. She sat beside him, not caring about the blood soaking into her jeans. "I scared him off," she said. "For now, at least."

"You're brave," he said. "You're just like me—you spit in the bastard's face and then go someplace alone to wet your pants."

She laughed a little, but not much. "Is there anything I can do for your, uh, bleeding? To slow it down, I mean?"

He shook his head. Without warning a bright line of blood rolled from the corner of his mouth to his chin. "It's time," he said weakly. "You're ready now."

She knew, but she did not want to know. He indicated the key in her hand, the stupid, misshapen, king-size key.

"Fill it."

She whipped her head back and forth. White dust sifted down, her farewell momento of Mission Inn plaster. "Look, Brayker," she said softly, "I'm not the right person for this. I'm too wild, too irresponsible. And too young."

"I was nineteen," he said. "I didn't want it, either. Give me your hand."

She frowned. He raised his shattered right arm and held the wrist steady with his left hand. "Your hand," he said again.

"Aha," she joked without humor. "Now I get to learn the secret keeper-of-the-key handshake."

He groaned. "My arm is killing me, but your jokes are worse. Take my hand."

She took it. It was hot and limp. Sudden pain seared into her palm.

Shafts of intense green light dappled the walls. “It’s yours now,” he said, and she pulled away, wagging her hand to cool it, then looked.

The tattoo on his palm had become hers. “But what does it mean?” she cried out. “What does it mean when the stars move? Yours were in a circle and mine are all scattered around.”

“When the stars align again,” he said weakly, “it will be your time to pass the key to someone else. Until then, run and don’t look back.”

“So it *is* true,” she said. “You said our destinies were the same. You came here, you came here and knew . . .”

“Knew that I’d find you, Jeryline. Knew that my time was up. But still I hoped, you know, hoped that maybe I could walk away from the job, live a few years as a free man, be a beach bum, putter around in my garden, collect stamps, do all the mundane things people do when they have no reason to be afraid. And most of all, the very best of all, get a decent night’s sleep. Just one big eight-hour snooze session.” He closed his eyes, his mouth turned up in a bit of a smile. “To sleep, Jeryline. That would be the best.”

She nodded slightly and glanced at the doorway. “As long as that blood seal holds,” she said, “you can sleep all you want. In the morning I’ll get help, we’ll haul your ass to a hospital, and then discuss this key business and how to get rid of the damn thing, melt it down for scrap, tie it to an atomic bomb, whatever. This is the space age. We’ll nuke that sucker into a big stinking pile of atoms.”

She looked down at him. His smile was still in place. One of his eyes was partially open. She touched his eyelash.

“Not now,” she whispered. “Please, Silas, not now.”

The ghostly drip of his blood onto the carpet faltered and quit. She turned away and dropped her head into her hands. The key clunked against her forehead and she almost hurled the thing away with a shout of anger and despair.

Something heavy shifted downstairs; what it could be she had no idea. Though her nose was caked with drying blood the aroma of smoke touched her nostrils, sharp and fresh. The noise repeated itself: burning lumber collapsing? The Salesman standing on a pile of furniture trying to saw a hole in the floor under her feet, like in a cartoon? She raised her head and looked at the key, gripping it fiercely in both hands. “I hate you,” she hissed at it, then checked the position of the orb and pressed it into the thick pool of blood on Brayker’s chest. Slowly, as if as reluctant as she was to continue this ongoing game, it began to fill.

Now she was crawling across the floor toward the stairway. The

smoke upstairs had grown to a dense white fog cut by ballooning swirls of more ominous colors, browns and blacks and greens. With her lips sucking air a fraction of an inch above the carpet, she was relying on the fire safety methods taught in elementary school to keep her from choking to death. It was working fairly well. At the head of the stairs, she tensed all her muscles and became a surfboard, riding down the steps on her stomach. At the bottom she became a snake again, concerned with only one thing: escape. No one was left behind to be saved; the whole world waited for her beyond these burning walls.

She had smeared herself heavily with Brayker's dead blood. The instinct made little sense to her but she had obeyed it anyway. The orb of the key was full to the point of leaking from its primitive seams. The salty stench of blood was a cloud hovering wherever she moved, wherever she breathed, but she welcomed it. Brayker had lived a long, long life before he died, and she was determined never to die young.

She crawled to the space where the front desk had once stood. Oddly, perhaps fatefully, the fire in this area had not done much damage before moving on. She cut to the right where the smoke was thinnest, rising up into a troglodyte posture, coughing into her hand. The bathroom, where she had seen the sign so strangely changed to include ghouls, still advertised its employees-only message. She pushed the door open and found the room free of smoke. With a grateful breath she raised up to her full height. The mirror above the sink caught her eye: a woman made of smeary blood and wild gray hair looked back at her. To her left was the bathtub, to her right the toilet. Above it was a small window with a pane of bumpy green glass. Could she fit through it? She knew now that she could do all manner of extraordinary things.

She was standing on the toilet when the door crashed open so hard the upper hinge broke in two and the whole door bent to the floor. The Salesman tromped over it and laughed at her. For this newest occasion he had manufactured himself a fireman's rubberized coat and pants and a shiny yellow fireman's hat with a long plastic bill in the front, and a long plastic bill in the back. He lifted a big white bullhorn to his lips and brayed madly into it.

"May I have your attention please! The premises are on fire. Repeat, the premises are on fire. Everyone on the premises is directed to panic."

She dug her fingernails under the metal frame of the window and tried to pull it open. Flakes of rust sifted down. She stabbed at the pane with the key but it only ricocheted off; the glass had a wire mesh embedded inside.

“Give us a hug,” the Salesman bawled, and put his arms around her waist.

Immediately he screamed and jumped away, flapping his hands, slapping at his smoking costume. “You slut!” he shouted. “You bloody, bleeding *slut!”*

He lurched to the bathtub and ripped the shower curtain down with one tremendous yank. Jeryline whipped her head to the left, the right. To the right was only a blank wall made of little blue ceramic tiles that had split and cracked under the weight of years. To her left, the open doorway, where thin drifts of smoke ambled past. She thrust the key out, menaced him with it, knowing that if a camera crew burst in and saw her carefully tiptoeing back and forth on the creaking lid of the toilet like this, she would have to demand that her face be computered out when it was televised.

The Salesman bundled the top and bottom of the shower curtain in his fists to form a parachute of sorts. He whipped it over Jeryline’s head with all the ease of a cowpoke snagging a dogie, and jerked her off balance. She slammed down on the toilet. Her teeth clicked together on the tip of her tongue and she tasted blood, more blood, it seemed the night was filled with blood. He twisted her inside the curtain and manhandled her to the bathtub. Her calves connected with old, cold porcelain and she fell backwards into the tub.

He cranked the water on. The crusty old shower head was filled with flakes of lime and debris but cold water shot out all the same. “First we washa da blood off,” he sang out, “and then we empty da key out.” He took her hand that held the key and maneuvered her fingers across the sides of the orb, forcing it open. Fresh crimson blood seeped out.

“No!” Jeryline screamed, furiously kicking and fighting him. She dragged her captive hand downward and bit into his fingers. He hollered and his grip loosened momentarily. She thought of Brayker, what Silas Brayker would do right now, how he had lived so long on the run with only his stamina and his wits to keep him a step away from surrendering the key.

“Damn you,” the Salesman growled. Water dripped from his hat as he battled her. “Why don’t you people ever just give up?”

She bit his fingers again. He roared. Knowledge, a hint of something that could not have come from her own mind, blossomed tentatively inside her brain. There was a way out of this. There was a way so simple the Salesman would never dream of it, because the Salesman only thought in terms of what he wanted, and the men and women who had dodged him for two thousand years thought in terms of how much he should have to pay. It was a price he would never accept:

total surrender.

She mashed her lips to the orb and sucked a huge mouthful of Brayker's warm blood into her mouth, and clamped her teeth and lips over the secret. She quit struggling. Grunting as he worked, the Salesman used her hand to shield himself from the power of the living key. When he had cleaned it under the spray of water he tore it out of her hand and let her fall away.

He held it up high, beaming with pleasure and pride. "This is totally cool, Jeryline," he said. "This is like, the best ever." He grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the tub. "We're talking major career move here, Jerry. I don't want you to feel bad for losing the key, though. Follow me."

He hauled her along as he left the restroom. The broken door scraped painfully under her back. Where the smoke grew thick enough to sting her eyes she was finally able to stand. Chuckling, whooping with joy, the Salesman towed her through the gaping blowhole that had been the front entrance, out across the destruction that had been a porch and a car, and under the soggy black sky.

"Finally!" he roared at the sky. "Ten thousand blind alleys! A million miles on the road. Jerks and idiots and assholes galore! But now it is MINE!"

He eyed Jeryline, panting. "Party time," he said. "Mind if I slip into something that is more after my own style?"

He raised his hands to the sky. A flash of lightning popped out of the clouds and touched him. For a moment he was engulfed in powdery blue fire. Then chunks of his body split and began to fall away like husks. Jeryline staggered backward a step. Underneath his many sets of clothes, underneath his very skin, was a being of ugly, boiling, orange light.

This new thing stepped close to her. "Tell me now," he said—and yep, it was the trusty old voice of the Salesman—"looking at me like this, don't you get a little hot?"

She offered him a toothful grin. Blood leaked between her teeth. His expression went from sheer glee to sheer horror. "Grglebrgle," she hummed through her nose, and with every bit of her strength spit all of Brayker's blood in his face.

It would have been disappointing, she later reflected, if he had simply melted like the wicked witch. It would have been disappointing if he had exploded like an overloaded boiler. It would have been disappointing if he had burst apart into a hundred little demons with squeaky voices that bumbled about in terror and then ran away. Instead of those options he chose the one most suiting his personality, the one that told her without doubt that he would be back

soon, and that he would be looking for her.

He rolled up like a cheap windowshade. The key dropped in the mud. Distantly, a touch of orange streaked across the sky, a nomad asteroid, she supposed, or the Salesman going back to the center of the cosmos to regroup and make new plans.

Or, she thought with a smile, it was Brayker's soul, free at last, free to live, free to love, free to sleep, from now until forever.

Epilogue

Four Days Later
Terre Haute, Indiana

The bus station just off Wabash Avenue was a joke, the hard little seats of the waiting area were scratched and gouged and uncomfortable. Jeryline had been waiting for the next connecting bus for longer than anyone should have to wait. She checked her watch, and opened the bus schedule in her hand. She had an aunt in Virginia who would let her stay in her home until she got back on her feet. It wasn't much of an offer, but the best Jeryline could drum up.

The bus was late. New Mexico was hot, but at least there it was a dry kind of heat. Here, in the armpit of Indiana, it was like living in a sauna. Virginia weather was probably the same, so she told herself she had better get used to it.

Minutes passed. Jeryline thought of the past, thought of the future. Before leaving the burning Mission Inn, she had refilled the orb with Brayker's cold, jellied blood. It was the hardest thing she had ever been forced to do, but there had been no choice involved. You either does it, she knew, or you doesn't. And so she did.

Now she stood, restless, trying to shove the memories from her mind, and wandered over to the dirty little water fountain around the corner from the empty gumball machine again, for lack of anything else to do. Warm chlorine mixed with a trace of water squirted feebly out, and she bathed her tongue with it, not daring to swallow and be dead soon.

Something hard and small rammed into her spine from behind. She jerked upright and whirled, a thousand dreadful thoughts zipping through her mind. But it was only a big ugly bastard with a lot of acne scars on his greasy face. "Your purse," he rasped. "Don't get brave and scream or nothing. Just give me the purse."

"I'm not carrying a purse," she said.

"Then money. Give me your money."

"All I've got is a couple bucks."

He looked her over. "You know, you ain't the ugliest broad I've ever seen. Go into the bathroom and keep your mouth shut, cause I'm right behind you."

Jeryline closed her eyes, weary of this. "Hey, big shot?" she said. "You're right about that."

He raised his eyebrows. “Right about what?”

“I ain’t the ugliest broad you’ve ever seen. But I’m the last broad you’re ever going to see.”

He frowned. “Huh?”

She grabbed the back of his head and smashed his face against the steel rim of the water fountain. “Peek-a-boo,” she said, raising him, and gouged his eyes out with two fingers of the same hand, the old Three Stooges style. He spasmed backward and rolled on the floor pawing at his face and bellowing.

She patted her pocket before moving on. The key was there. A smoking old wreck of a bus was now idling in the rectangle of shade behind the depot. She checked her ticket, checked the number of the bus, and stepped up. As she showed her ticket someone stepped up behind her, crowding her forward. She turned instinctively, hauling the key halfway out of her pocket before she even realized she had done it.

The man was a Black, well-dressed business-type. He glanced down at her hand, glanced in her eyes, and stepped back down to the ground. “Catch you later,” he said, and though it may have been the hazy midwestern sun, may have been a trick of the glare through the windows of the bus, his eyes seemed to glow inside, a subdued, bestial red that shone in his eyes before he turned away.

Jeryline found an empty seat. A teenage boy in the seat ahead glanced back at her, turned back to his business, then glanced again. “Wow,” he said. “Neat tattoo!”

Jeryline curled her hand. “Thanks.”

“No, really! I’d like one just like it, astrology stuff, when I get older. How much did it cost you?”

She smiled at his innocence. “It cost me a lot,” she said. “It cost me more than you could ever know.”

He scowled at her, disbelieving, turned away, and got involved in other things.

Which was just fine with her.

Author's Final Interlude

by
T. C. Keeper

That's about the size of it, loyal Cryptoids. I just faxed a copy of the manuscript to a team of top-notch editors at Pocket Books in New York City. I've heard they get off on slashing things here and there, hacking out big chunks, tearing writers' hearts out. Who better to understand me? And I figure that since Pocket has a kangaroo for a logo, they'll get things hopping. Hah!

While I wait for a reply, here is an update.

Wormwood is, of course, a ghost town now, and will be forever. The Mission Inn burned to the ground, leaving only unanswered questions for the authorities of New Mexico. They found nine charbroiled skeletons but could only identify eight: Wanda, Cordelia, Sheriff Tupper, Deputy Martel, Uncle Willie, Roach, Wally Enfield, and Danny Long. The ninth one, that of Silas Brayker, had the coroner mystified. The bones, he said at the inquest, were those of a man almost one hundred years old. No one could imagine who it might have been.

The remains of Silas Brayker were quietly buried in a pauper's grave in Junction City, which was marked only with a small cement cross. Several years later the caretaker found an old military medal hanging from it by a faded purple ribbon. He checked the library and found that it was a meritorious service medal from World War One. Rather than pawn it or sell it, he tucked it into his wallet, and on every Memorial Day since has draped it there again.

In the meantime, Jeryline Bascombe wanders from town to town, job to job, hiding from the law and the inevitable appearance of the next Salesman. She does not know when the stars on her palm will shift again, but she knows they will, and on that day she will face Brayker's fate as bravely as he did.

Wait. The fax is beeping. Something's humming. Now a sheet of paper is slowly reeling out. It says, it says . . .

To: T. C. Keeper

From: The Editors. Pocket Books

Dear Mr. Keeper: The only way you will publish this ghastly book is over our dead bodies. The only way it will become a

movie is if you kill every producer and director in Hollywood.

Hmmm . . . I think that could be arranged. Don't you?
See you at the movies, kiddies!